

**COLONIALISM & CULTURAL IDENTITY:  
THE MAKING OF A HINDU DISCOURSE, BENGAL 1867-1905.**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the construction of a Hindu cultural identity in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries in Bengal. The aim is to examine how this identity was formed by rationalising and valorising an available repertoire of images and myths in the face of official and missionary denigration of Hindu tradition. This phenomenon is investigated in terms of a discourse (or a conglomeration of discursive forms) produced by a middle-class operating within the constraints of colonialism.

The thesis begins with the Hindu Mela founded in 1867 and the way in which this organisation illustrated the attempt of the Western educated middle-class at self-assertion. In constructing a homogeneous Hindu identity, this social group hegemonically appropriated the distinct traditions of subordinated groups. Crucial to this project was another related one - that of history-writing. History, it was felt, contained the essence of civilisation and culture. A refutation of colonial notions about Hindus and Bengalis had to be achieved through the fusion of the historical and the mythological which sought to displace colonial history-writing.

The anxiety about an ineffectual male identity ascribed to the Bengali male by colonial discourse prompted the imaging of meaningful icons of resistance in the form of heroic womanhood. The links between the figures, i.e., of the motherland, the mother and the ideal wife, are therefore especially significant. No less important is the reformulation of an alternative heroic male identity out of the conventional Hindu institution of Sannyas or asceticism by Vivekananda. He forwarded a notion of spiritual conquest by addressing the universalist dimensions of Hinduism. The political

implications of this constructed identity was clearly revealed in the cultural events that preceded the partition of Bengal as well as those that formed and directed the Swadeshi movement.



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### ABBREVIATIONS USED:

ABCL: The Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library.

CWSV: The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda.

CSSH: Comparative Studies in Society and History.

EPW: Economic and Political Weekly.

IB Archives: Intelligence Bureau Archives, Calcutta.

IOLR: India Office Library and Records, London.

NAI: National Archives of India, New Delhi.

UDHPG: The Unpublished Diary of Hemendra Prasad Ghose, Central  
Library, Jadavpur University, Calcutta.

RNP: The Report of the Native Newspapers.

WBSA: West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta.

## GLOSSARY

antahpur: inner quarters.

artha: wealth

aryavarta: the land of the Aryans, in this case India.

avatar: incarnation.

bibi: aristocratic Muslim woman, in this context a woman who imitates the European woman.

biratva: bravery.

bhadralok: educated middle-class in Bengal.

bhadramahila: middle-class Bengali woman.

Bharat Mata: Mother India.

bahubal: physical strength.

birya: courage, also semen.

biryapat: ejaculation.

brahmacharya: celibacy, also one of the four stages in the life of a Hindu.

brata: ritual for women.

dharma: duty, religion.

gerua: saffron, traditionally signifying renunciation.

kama: love, desire.

karma: one of the yogas recommended by the Bhagavad Gita, emphasising action.

lathi: bamboo-stave.

lathiyal: men trained in fighting with bamboo-staves, usually employed by zamindars.

madhyabitta-sreni: middle class.

math: abbey.

mem: European woman.

mleccha: non-Aryan, non-Hindu, in this context Muslim.

moksha: salvation.

paik: foot-soldier.

paloyan: wrestler.

purusha: male principle.

rishi: holy man.

sahadharmini: wife, literally, 'she who shares the same dharma'.

samadhi: yogic state of absolute detachment from the physical world.

sannyasi: ascetic.

santan: child, in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Ananda Math, a group of ascetics devoted to the Motherland.

sati: the act of self-immolation by a woman on the funeral pyre of her husband, a woman who thus immolates herself, also a chaste woman.

shakti: power, female principle.

Shankara: another name for the god Shiva.

shishya: follower.

stotra: ceremonial chant.

varna: caste.

yavan: literally non-Hindu, in this context Muslim.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The preliminary preparation of this thesis began in Calcutta in 1988. In its original form it was to be a study of the changing nature of a Hindu identity as articulated by several key-figures within Indian nationalism. However, as the research progressed I became increasingly aware of the intricacies within such articulations and the thesis became more sharply focused on defining themes of this identity as it expressed itself in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal.

This significant shift in emphasis would not have been possible without the sustained interest and constructive advice of my supervisor, David Arnold. His astute comments and insightful interventions made me aware of the rich dimensions of the sources I was looking at. His patience and consideration also gave me confidence to make a productive transition from literature into history. I take this opportunity to express my deeply-felt gratitude to him.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his reminiscences about the beginnings of the nationalist movement in India published in 1930, Bipin Chandra Pal wrote:

At the back of this reaction and revival there was undoubtedly a new national self-consciousness and a new pride of race which commenced to openly repudiate pretensions of European thought and culture over Hindu thought and life. This social reaction and religious revival possessed the Hindu mind all over India, and offered an effective check for a time, to our religious and social movement.<sup>1</sup>

Only very recently have historians noted the basic assumption that underlay statements such as Pal's - the fundamental identification of the 'national self-consciousness' with an essentialised 'Hindu mind'.<sup>2</sup> The common historicist tendency of nationalist leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal, as also nationalist historians like R.C. Majumdar has been to construct Hindu tradition as normative Indian tradition, as if being Indian meant essentially being Hindu.<sup>3</sup> This thesis examines what made this particular construction of subjectivity possible and even seem 'natural' to its articulators in Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This thesis takes as a starting point the foundation of the Hindu Mela in Calcutta in 1867. Literally denoting a gathering for Hindus, the Mela was translated, significantly by its organisers as a 'National Gathering'. Not only was the

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<sup>1</sup>Bipin Chandra Pal, Beginnings of Freedom Movement in Modern India, Calcutta, 1959, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>See Gyanendra Pandey, 'Hindus and Others: The Militant Hindu Construction', Economic and Political Weekly, 28 December 1991, pp. 2997-3009.

<sup>3</sup>R.C. Majumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India, 3 Vols., 1962-3 rpt. Calcutta, 1971.



establishment of the Mela an attempt at organising an association by the colonial middle class, drawn along Hindu lines, it was also an attempt to retain the concept of the 'mela' within the public dimension of a national association. Because it predated the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885, it has been seen by scholars of Indian nationalism as a prefiguration of organised patriotism and its influence has not been given any detailed consideration. What is important about this prefiguration was not only the spate of patriotic literature it yielded but the vital themes of self-definition that it generated.

What then purported to have been a discourse about a broader nationalist identity seems to have been more an attempt to negotiate an oppositional identity informed and shaped by Hindu ideas. The historical, spiritual and gender dimensions of this cultural and political identity shaped and directed the Swadeshi movement of 1905. The cultural identity that emerged from these ideas became increasingly pervasive by the end of the nineteenth century and paved the way for a political self-definition.

The deployment of Western notions within the indigenous reconstruction of a system of self-representations, refashioned from an indigenous repertoire of images and myths, hints at the complex interactions that went into the redefining of what constituted a cultural identity. Rather than identifying the ideology of the dominant indigenous elite in a colonial situation as a formed and fixed construction, this thesis emphasises the mechanisms of change and sees the process of self-definition itself to be in continual flux.

The correspondence between notions of redefined Hindu ideas and nationalism

in Bengal, has of course been recognised by earlier scholars.<sup>4</sup> Earlier scholarship preoccupied with the 'Bengal Renaissance' had distinguished between an earlier period of reform followed by a period of 'revivalism', although reformism never excluded revivalism. This basic dichotomy apart, another distinction was posed by scholarship which based itself on the 'Renaissance' model between 'tradition' and 'modernity' and at a more general level between nationalism and reform.<sup>5</sup> Later scholars discarded such distinctions to emphasise instead the limits of concepts like rationalism and modernity. The colonial context further constrained the 'modern' educated Indian's attempt to articulate a 'rationalised' identity.<sup>6</sup> While all these debates have offered a rich variety of viewpoints from which to approach the formation of a nationalist identity,<sup>7</sup> it was the urge to write history 'from below' - from the perspective of the subordinate rather than that of the dominant classes - that

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<sup>4</sup>While Sushobhan Sarkar had hinted at this nexus in his Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays, New Delhi, 1970, the links were made slightly more explicit in the scholarship of the 1970s. See especially, Niharranjan Ray, Nationalism in India: An Historical Analysis of Its Stresses and Strains, Aligarh, 1973.

<sup>5</sup>C.H. Heimsath, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform: The Dynamics of Indian Modernisation, 1773-1885, Princeton, 1964, David Kopf, British Orientalism and The Bengal Renaissance, Berkeley, 1969, Kenneth Jones's later work focussed on the same problem in the context of Punjab, Arya Dharma: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth Century Punjab, 1976, rpt., New Delhi, 1989.

<sup>6</sup>See V.C. Joshi (ed.), Ram Mohan and the Process of Modernisation in India, New Delhi, 1975, Barun De (ed.), Perspectives in the Social Sciences I: Historical Dimensions Calcutta, 1977. A significant study of the transformations of perceptions brought about by the contact with the West is Tapan Raychaudhuri's Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal, 1988, rpt., Delhi, 1989.

<sup>7</sup>For a recent survey of approaches to Indian cultural history, see Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, 'Histories in transition: Approaches to the Study of Colonialism and Culture in India', History Workshop, No. 32, Autumn 1991, pp. 110-27.

dramatically altered Indian historiography in several ways.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of the present thesis, the significance of the subaltern project lies in the theoretical questions the collective have prompted. Particularly important in this context is the demolition of monolithic constructions of the colonial world and the creation of a space from which to ask questions about the nature of resistance and its relationship to the processes of internalisation.<sup>9</sup> The importance given to Gramsci's notion of hegemony that has emerged out of this discussion has had significant implications for the study of identity-formation within a colonial context.

This tradition of current Indian historiography acknowledges its debt to the methodology evolved by Michel Foucault. Foucault's exploration of the power/knowledge relation as something deeply embedded within the social body, enables us to discuss the process of marginalisation of certain segments of society within a network of power and domination (Madness and Civilisation, 1961, and Discipline and Punish, 1975, trans. 1977). His examination of the founding assumptions of knowledge in Western society has brought into critical focus not only the nature of history itself,<sup>10</sup> but also the ways in which power structures the historical knowledge about the colonised world.

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<sup>8</sup>Ranajit Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies Vols.I-VI, Delhi, 1982-89.

<sup>9</sup>See especially, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern studies: Deconstructing Historiography' in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds.), Selected Subaltern Studies, New York, 1988, pp. 3-44.

<sup>10</sup>See Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe, Middleton, 1980, Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism, Baltimore, 1978, Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, Baltimore, 1987 and Dominick LaCapra, Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language, Ithaca, 1978.

Drawing upon Foucault's delineation of the discourse of dominance, Edward Said in Orientalism looks at the relationship between imperialism and culture and the processes by which the dominant culture of imperialism creates an imaginary Orient robbed of history and 'subjectivity'.<sup>11</sup> Thus the Orient occupies a specific space with the hierarchised European understanding of the world based on a given binary, i.e., the split between the Oriental and the Occidental. Said then goes on to demonstrate how this 'ontological and epistemological' distinction is reinforced. The Orientalist discourse which in a certain sense creates the Orient, is, he says:

above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial and imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of tastes, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we do" and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do).<sup>12</sup>

Various forces in Said's description act in concert to forge imperialism's great 'chain of command' and accomplish the 'Orientalising' of the Orient. In the process, the set of values attached to the Orient becomes detached from specific contemporary reality and attach instead 'to a series of valorised contacts it had with a distant European past'.<sup>13</sup> For Said Orientalism is a monolithic power structure which by its

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<sup>11</sup>Edward Said, Orientalism, New York, 1978.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

very presence obliterates the possibility of a discourse that can counter it.<sup>14</sup> By focusing on a counter-discourse, this thesis looks at the ways in which indigenous reconstructions often deployed Orientalist ideology in framing an oppositional, self-descriptive discourse.

In the Indian context, colonial discourse was characterised by aggressiveness and romanticism. While the former trait expressed itself in missionary discourse, colonial ethnography and recruitment policy, the latter was represented by scholars like William Jones and others who described themselves as Orientalists. The complexities of cultural contact and redefinitions in the colonial Indian context can only be partially comprehended with Said's critical tools insightful though they are in other contexts. Said's work has given way to recent research which attempts to locate the multiple strands of complicity between Orientalist knowledge and imperial hegemonic control.<sup>15</sup> Other studies not directly indebted to Said, have concentrated

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<sup>14</sup>Recent debates in Indian historiography ensuing from Said's discussion, focus on what constitutes post-Orientalist historiography. See especially, Gyan Prakash 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography', Comparative Studies in Society and History (hereafter CSSH), 32:2 April 1990, pp. 383-408. Also Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook's response: 'After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World', CSSH, 34:1, January 1992, pp. 141-67, and Prakash's subsequent reply: 'Can the Subaltern Ride? A Reply to O'Hanlon and Washbrook', CSSH, 34:1, January 1992, pp. 168-84.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of how English Studies functioned hegemonically to reinsert an 'essential' Indian into Western civilisation, see Gauri Vishwanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India, London, 1990. Martin Maw's study has shown the links between missionary perceptions and Orientalist scholarship, see Martin Maw, Visions of India: Fulfilment Theology, the Aryan Race Theory, and the Work of British Protestant Missionaries in Victorian India, Frankfurt, 1990. Or on a different tack, Ranajit Guha, An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and Its Implications, Calcutta, 1988. On the other hand, Ronald Inden's has been a parallel attempt to locate what constitutes subjectivity and agency in the Indian context. See Ronald Inden, Imagining India, Oxford,

on the complex process which enabled the recuperation of Western notions within nationalist discourse.

Partha Chatterjee in his Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (1986) has indicated how the three stages of nationalist thought - identified by him as ideological moments of departure, manoeuvre and arrival in fact duplicate the thematic of the dominant structure. The significance of Chatterjee's work lies in his adaptation of a theoretical framework from Gramsci's notion of 'passive revolution' in the context of emerging Indian nationalism. According to Chatterjee, the values forwarded in colonial countries like India were based upon the values promulgated by the European Enlightenment and expressed themselves in the hegemony of empiricist epistemology and scientific rationalism. These values persisted in their hold over nationalist thought even as it struggled to assert principles of self-governance and self-determination. Nationalist thought, therefore, was trapped within the structure of power it sought to reject and expressed its inherent contradictoriness in preserving the division between the ruler and the ruled. Taking Chatterjee's basic premise this thesis will argue, however, that the pervasive Hindu cultural identity that was reconstructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Bengal was the result of multiple interactions with colonial discourse. Inherent in the process of reconstruction was the marginalisation of subordinate social and religious groups. The construction of an oppositional identity in Hindu terms was therefore able to move from a cultural construct to a religio-political one.

Two defining attributes of the methodology employed to describe and understand the formation of a cultural identity are Gramsci's notion of hegemony used in conjunction with discourse as an analytical tool.

The term 'discourse' encompasses a wide range of ideas and practices which exist as a conglomerate organised and informed by the mechanics of power. In the colonial context the encounter between dominant colonial ideas and self-descriptive categories was a power-laden one. The oppositional self constituted its subjectivity by deploying a 'technology of power' that could challenge domination.<sup>16</sup> At the same time this oppositional discourse expressed a broad cultural identity which subsumed the range of identities projected by social, educational and political organisations. Yet, what constitutes the 'power' of a colonised people? This thesis proposes to understand the dynamics of oppositional power by considering the notion of discourse as an attempt by an articulate group to author an oppositional identity. The nineteenth-century Hindu discourse was mainly authored by an indigenous middle class.

According to Gramsci, in any society the social group at the top of the hierarchy attempts to organise and order a system within which it can improve its position 'because of the need to create the conditions most favourable to the expansion of their own class'.<sup>17</sup> However, in a colonial society where coercion obviously plays an important role, how do we understand the category of class or even a cultural self-

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<sup>16</sup>See Luther H. Martin et al (eds.), Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault, London, 1988.

<sup>17</sup>Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London, 1971, pp. 5-6.

assertion? A detailed consideration of how the concept of class can be understood in a colonial situation lies beyond the scope of this thesis. To an indigenous middle class functioning in a colonial context, the capacity to organise the social order remained a part of the aspiration structure rather than a realisable practicality. Within such a context, Gramsci's notion of hegemony helps us to understand the importance of a cultural agenda of the bhadralok who claiming a shared Hindutva sought to appropriate the distinct traditions of the subordinate groups. In the process, it attempted to smooth over differences between sects, castes and other social distinctions in a non-coercive manner. Through a variety of discursive constructions, the articulate middle class in colonial Bengal aimed to assert itself and to speak on behalf of the subordinate classes.

Furthermore, leadership within the colonial Indian context was not provided by an urban industrial community in the way Gramsci elaborated. The articulators of this discourse, mainly the Western-educated middle class, saw themselves as vanguards of a cultural movement towards self-definition. However, within colonial parameters, the articulate urban middle class was hardly a bourgeoisie in the classical sense of the word. While earlier studies by J. H. Broomfield and Anil Seal have looked at this articulate urban group as an 'elite' group on account of its upper-caste status,<sup>18</sup> other studies have emphasised the coming into being of a new social group on account of the 'new' social economy ushered in by the colonial administrative

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<sup>18</sup>John H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal, Berkeley, 1968; Anil Seal, The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century, Cambridge, 1968.



apparatus.<sup>19</sup> As we shall see, the self-image projected by this group was that of an educated 'middle-class' or shikshita madhyabitta. The bhadralok who articulated this self-descriptive discourse was moreover a social group whose social roots lay, 'in government service or the professions of law, education, journalism or medicine - with which was very often combined some connection with land in the shape of intermediate tenures which were rapidly proliferating in Permanent Settlement Bengal'.<sup>20</sup> Many of its members were employed by the colonial state and therefore occupied a subordinate position vis-a-vis the ruling elite. This vanguard group, however, often sought elite affiliation, from zamindars as well as British officials, in its activities and perceived itself as moral and intellectual leaders of colonised Bengal creating and recreating this self-image in a network of institutions and ideas. While it spoke on behalf of the subordinate classes, its hegemonising activities were confined within its own social group. Thus this small but articulate group in Calcutta sought to mobilise peers in the mofussil towns and viewed its own performance in organisations as well as literary creations as a rehearsal for its ultimate acquisition of the power to rule.

Its involvement with the peasantry remained limited and riddled with contradiction: compassion and concern were often articulated in the same breath as a faith in the rule of law and 'good' colonial administrators. As Ranajit Guha has illustrated with reference to the indigo revolt in Bengal in the 1860s, the Bengali

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<sup>19</sup>See Arvind Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Bombay, 1948, and B.B. Misra, The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times, Delhi, 1961.

<sup>20</sup>Sumit Sarkar, Modern India: 1885-1947, 1983, rpt. Madras, 1985, p. 68.

intelligentsia's defence of the provocative play Neel Darpan can be seen as:

the fabrication of a nice little middle-class myth about a liberal Government, a kind-hearted Christian priest, a great but impoverished poet and a rich intellectual who was also a pillar of society - a veritable league of Power and Piety and Poetry - standing up in defence of the poor ryot. Coming when it did, this myth did more than all else to comfort a bhadralok conscience unable to reconcile a borrowed ideal of liberty with a sense of its own helplessness and cowardice in the face of a peasant revolt.<sup>21</sup>

In colonial Bengal, the intelligentsia dominated the subordinate social groups, by 'silencing' the peasantry by turning them into objects of their compassion. Moreover, within bhadralok constructions of the glorious past, the inarticulate peasant had no history. This also explains the pervasive nature of the emerging Hindu discourse which hegemonically created an oppositional self-image capable of countering British denigration while at the same time imposed a reconstructed set of symbols on the humble subordinate groups. This discourse, largely a creation of the educated middle class of Calcutta, therefore, often spoke on behalf of the rest of Bengal and indeed the whole of India.

The hegemonic drive of the Calcutta bhadralok sought a heroic antecedent in the martial legends of geographically distant peoples such as the Rajputs and the Marathas in an attempt to construct a desirable self-image that could effectively oppose the colonial denigration of the Babu. The consequence of the British attempt to create hegemonic stereotypes in the form of 'martial' and 'non-martial' races was the creation of a counter-hegemonic project by an articulate indigenous group which

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<sup>21</sup>Ranajit Guha, 'Neel-Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror', The Journal of Peasant Studies, II:1, October 1974, p. 3. The reference here is to the Rev. James Long, the poet Michael Madhusudan Datta who had translated the play and Kaliprasanna Sinha who had bailed out the Rev. Long.

incorporated and attempted to transcend colonial hegemony. The articulation of an alternative masculinity and the construction of a heroic femininity, this thesis argues, were the result of similar 'inventions'.<sup>22</sup>

By depicting self-definitions that emerge in a colonial situation as a result of interactions between a subordinated but articulate indigenous social group and the dominant Western one, this approach enables us to move away from dichotomies of East and West, tradition and modernity, and establish a critical and interrogative relationship with the past. Moreover, by emphasising the ways in which the contest for meaning and the system of valorisation depends on a hegemonising social group this thesis attempts to reveal the intersection between an emerging Hindu identity and nationalism.

Western education, as also Orientalist fascination with India's glorious past, enabled the construction of this cultural identity by attempting to remodel the present into a closer resemblance to the putative past. Perceiving the essence of their identity as lying in a previous age, the articulate middle class transformed several Orientalist ideas in significant ways. Thus the identity of this class in Bengal constructed for itself a universalist notion of Hinduism that erased differences between Hindus across class, time and geographical region. This cultural identity was specific to Bengalis, although at times its articulators conflated a pan-Indian Hindu identity with ingredients of 'Bengaliness'. This period also saw the rise of vernacular literature in most Indian provinces and a related dimension of this oppositional cultural identity was its

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<sup>22</sup>See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge, 1983.

linguistic dimension. In the context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal, language served as a vehicle of the reconstructed Hindu identity in significant ways.<sup>23</sup> Most of the sources considered in this thesis are in Bengali, although the focus of the thesis is on themes that aided the crystallisation of a Hindu cultural identity. However, the ways in which language identity shaped itself is an issue that lies outside the present scope of the thesis.

This thesis concentrates on themes which were pivotal to the Hindu identity that was shaped by this discourse. It analyses in detail the imagery that was deployed by this discourse in pursuit of a distinctive cultural identity. Any discourse is a conglomerate of ideas which interact at multiple levels. The pervasiveness of the nineteenth-century Hindu discourse is demonstrated in a wide variety of sources. In tracing a dominant pattern of identity that was reconstructed by the articulate middle class of Bengal, this thesis looks at school-books, historical journals, records of indigenous associations particularly the Hindu Mela, autobiographies, novels and newspaper reports.<sup>24</sup> This is by no means a comprehensive record of the media of identity-formation in the colonial context in Bengal - there were simultaneously movements where identity was configured differently. This is an attempt to trace a paradigm of oppositional nationalist identity which has guided several nationalist itineraries and, moreover, continues to direct through its many manifestations the

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<sup>23</sup>Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Thinking, Speaking, Being: Language and the Historical Formation of Identities in India', paper presented at the South Asian History Seminar, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, May 1992. Publication forthcoming.

<sup>24</sup>The translation of Bengali sources, unless otherwise stated is mine.

injuring tradition of communalism. The specific links between past and present agendas though undoubtedly important, however, lie far beyond the scope of this thesis.

Chapter I looks at the Hindu Mela and its organs as a centre for the production of a self-defining discourse that operated as a counter-discourse to the essentialising colonial perceptions of the Hindu. The Hindu Mela set up its own hegemonic project in opposition to hegemonic stereotype of the 'weak' Bengali articulated by colonial discourse. By articulating on behalf of other classes its own role as leaders in the project of cultural self-definition the articulators of this discourse attempted to deflect and counter the hegemony of the dominant colonial discourse. The self-legitimising agenda of the Hindu Mela existed in a complex relation with the dominant colonial discourse: its boundaries were demarcated by colonial categorisations. Yet what makes this particular attempt at assembling a 'community'<sup>25</sup> interesting is not just the fact that it comprised the activities of a hegemonising class but also because of the ways in which the defining categories that it used to forge its identity took from, as also countered, Western notions about the Indian/Bengali/Hindu. The Hindu Mela is significant because unlike the contemporaneous Indian National Congress with its avowed secular aims, it illustrates the construction of a Hindu cultural identity. While some of the personalities discussed here were later active in the Indian National Congress, the organisation and its contribution to this discourse on cultural identity both lie beyond the scope of this thesis.

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<sup>25</sup>I use the word in its general sense as used by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism, London, 1983.

Chapter II takes up the project of history writing which had become for nineteenth-century Bengalis a contested cultural terrain. The immense displacement experienced by the Bengali bhadralok expressed itself in a reconstructed heroic past reinforcing its self-image as leaders. The complementarity of the mythical and the historical achieved for its articulators a double empowerment which sought to make resistance to the dominant colonial discourse meaningful.

Chapter III concerns itself with the ways in which the Hindu discourse deployed gender. In the face of continuing debates with colonial and missionary discourses that sought to legislate and 'invade' the intimate and private affective space (i.e., the family), this discourse redefined women's roles in terms of the sahadharmini (the 'true' companion of the English-educated husband) and the mother. Endowed with a heroic history women became for this discourse emblems of spiritual resistance. In an interesting twist this discourse also incorporated Queen Victoria into its sacred portals as a symbol of fulfilled motherhood as well an abstraction signifying hegemonic control and command.

The icons of resistance were shaped in gender-specific terms to confront the colonisers who accused the Bengali middle class of ineffectiveness with an alternative masculinity. Chapter IV looks at Swami Vivekananda's concept as one of the chief articulators of this alternative masculinity reconstituting the institution of sannyas or asceticism. Vivekananda's reshaping of this conventional Hindu institution furnished the Hindu discourse with a major icon of resistance - the sannyasi. In his characterisation asceticism became in its redefined capacity no longer a means for private and personal spiritual salvation but spoke for the disciplined commitment to

the achievement of social good. This significant icon was once again deployed in the discourse of the Swadeshi movement as an empowering device.

The last chapter, Chapter V, looks at specific institutions, ceremonies and literary forms in which this discourse manifested itself during the Swadeshi political movement that followed the Partition of Bengal in 1905. The encounter between an evolving discourse about identity and the political moment transformed the cultural component of that identity into a religio-political one.

Hindu discourse and the nationalist identity it engendered was thus the result of multiple negotiations. Negotiating an identity in terms of images largely drawn from Hinduism it reinterpreted these images in terms of a 'common' cultural heritage silencing the peasant and marginalising the Muslim community. In its search for a desirable, oppositional self-image the hegemonising middle class expressed itself in organisational and literary activities that polarised around certain themes. These themes functioned as dominant metaphors for the self within efforts to organise a hegemonic cultural identity.

## CHAPTER I

### CONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING A HINDU IDENTITY

In January 1867, the National Paper, an English weekly instituted by the Tagores of Jorasanko carried an unsigned article entitled 'Civilisation and Power'. Although the article did not draw any radical conclusions, its significance lay in the manner in which it linked culture with power within colonial parameters:

Civilisation is a myth, a mere sound, bugbear and humbug when the principal concomitant of civilisation is wanting, the power and energy to sustain that refinement at all risks and hazards. France and Russia and England are enjoying every day more and more enlightened civilisation, but who can question that they are every day also increasing more and more their powers. India or more properly Bengal is not similarly situated.<sup>1</sup>

The imperial project was thus perceived as being an essential part of what was designated 'more enlightened civilisation.' Therefore power had to be a pivotal issue in the framing of an oppositional cultural identity in colonial Bengal. Yet the empowerment of a colonially dominated culture and its substantiation was not a straightforward or uncomplicated matter, it often drew upon Orientalist notions and was linked with questions about what constituted 'Indian' and more specifically 'Hindu' culture.

Formulations about what constituted an Indian culture and its origins in an ancient civilisation, were by 1867 well-established and advocated by Orientalist scholarship; these formulations were taken up, reconstructed and redefined as Bengali/Hindu cultural identity began to assert itself by the 1850s. The National Paper,

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<sup>1</sup>'Civilisation and Power', National Paper, 23 January 1867, p. 42.



a champion of nineteenth-century cultural self-assertion articulated in 1867 the existence of a crucial, imperial agenda which shaped enlightened culture and civilisation. Power then lay at the bedrock of civilisation and was consequently related to visibility as a nation. This awareness, as we shall see took multiple forms and helped in the fashioning of a particular type of cultural identity in nineteenth-century Bengal. The notion of power, or rather its lack lay at the core of this awareness. This Chapter attempts to trace some of the themes and contexts that enabled the crystallisation of an oppositional Hindu identity.

With constant and continuous official involvement with questions about appropriate legislation, culture had been brought into a sharp focus as essentially constituting a people's identity. Added to this was the designation of certain practices as barbaric and hence uncivilised, by evangelising missionaries. As Lata Mani has perceptively demonstrated in the process of formulating legislation to ban sati every attempt was made to model it closely on the Shastras.<sup>2</sup> The laws formulated in British India encapsulated the paradoxical identification of the barbaric in Indian tradition together with what was excavated from Shastric authority as 'authentic' tradition. The way in which the interrogation of the 'true' nature of Hindu tradition affected everyday life, has been recorded by Mahendranath Datta. Speaking about the mid-nineteenth century he says:

few people in those days knew what Hinduism was, or its essentials; fewer still had read the scriptures, which were rarely available those days. Hence people

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<sup>2</sup>See Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, 1780-1833', PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1989. Publication forthcoming.

found it difficult to refute the ideas of the missionaries.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed the inability of large sections of the indigenous population to respond to western forms of abstraction, was often taken by missionaries as a sign of ignorance of the actual meaning of religious practices. As James Kennedy pointed out in his comparison of Christianity and Hinduism:

Composed as they [Hindu religious texts] have been in a language utterly unknown to the people generally, and made up as they are of the most heterogenous elements, they can be neither a Directory or a Standard. We have abundant reason to be thankful when we turn from them to our little Bible.<sup>4</sup>

While missionaries emphasised the ignorance of their indigenous congregation, their stress remained on textual standards - 'scriptures generated the norm. The Baptists contrasted the brahmins they met with descriptions of them in the scriptures and challenged them to live up to their textual counterparts.'<sup>5</sup> These arguments and counter-arguments about the actual nature of Hindu tradition precipitated in nineteenth-century Bengal an entry into what we might call the 'definitional mode' whereby attempts were made to interpret, clarify and define the meaning of tradition.

The consciousness of the power of the dominant forces - official, Orientalist and missionary, during this transitional period was intense and continuous, often

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<sup>3</sup>Mahendranath Datta, quoted in S.N. Dhar A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda, Vol I, Madras, 1975, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup>James Kennedy, Christianity and the Religions of India, Mirzapore, 1874, p. 163. This assumption marked the well known missionary tactic of demonstrating, in Mani's words, that, 'the members of their congregation were not properly 'Hindu' or 'Muslim', indeed did not have the knowledge that was required to be true to their faith.' See Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, 1780-1833', p. 111.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

focussing attention on reform.<sup>6</sup> The changes in the texture of social existence brought about by colonial intervention in the legal and educational field, had brought in its wake a reinforced vigour in employing indigenous arguments embellished with Western logic in resisting and countering the dominant. This expressed itself in the literary as well as the organisational efforts of the indigenous intelligentsia, and here we shall study some of its aspects.

Yet Hindu discourse, as it articulated its oppositional sense of identity, was by no means a monolithic formation. It had what Tapan Raychaudhuri has aptly termed its 'aggressive chauvinism',<sup>7</sup> articulated by men like Sashadhar Tarkachuramani and Krishnananda Swami; as well as by men like Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda who validated and rationalised a reconstructed Hindu identity following a process of critical self-searching. While the overwhelming concern with things Hindu swirled across both sides of the barrier, our main concern here will be to trace the formation of a prevalent and pervasive Hindu discourse which sought to forge itself out of icons and rituals which belonged to an indigenous register by applying to them ideas and concepts that were common to European thought. This was not unexpected as the oppositional Hindu identity was being framed in a specific way by a English-educated Bengali middle class. The Hindu discourse which emerged during this period constructed its icons out of these

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<sup>6</sup>For an assessment of the contributions of Protestant missionaries to social reform see, G.A. Oddie, Social Protest in India: British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms, 1850-1900, Delhi, 1979.

<sup>7</sup>Tapan Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal, 1988 rpt., Delhi, 1989, p. 9.

notions and thus encapsulated a specific Hindu identity. Moreover, this particular configuration of identity-formation had serious implications for early nationalism. The process by which this identity congealed was generated by the activities of an educated indigenous middle class. This oppositional discourse of identity thus expressed itself in discursive as well as organisational forms. The Hindu Mela as we shall see, was central to this identity-formation in terms of the ideas it disseminated about 'Hindu-ness'.

In this context, while it is important to distinguish between the Hindu chauvinism of Pandits like Sashadhar Tarkachuramani and the formation of a rationalised Hindu identity which began in the nineteenth century in Bengal, both varieties of articulation shared one thing in common - both began as reactions against missionary and official denigration of the 'Hindu tradition'. Both groups participated and projected their perceptions about their mutual project of cultural self-assertion. Again, both contributed to a conglomeration of ideas about what constituted Hindu norms on the basis of a refashioned Hinduism that became identified within this cultural agenda as an ideal religion.

### **'Hindu' Nationalism and Universalism**

With the vigorous interaction of Orientalist ideas with indigenous ones, the abstract qualities that constituted a Hindu were being constantly focussed upon. While earlier scholarship has concentrated on the reform movement and studied the changing notions of what constituted Hinduism, in terms of the advent of a Neo-Hinduism or

in terms of organisations like the Brahmo Samaj, very little attention has been paid to the numerous relationships that held together the urban educated population who articulated these notions. For this purpose, the concept of a discourse, in Foucault's sense, is useful.<sup>8</sup> However our use of this term will involve certain important modifications. While accepting Foucault's broad notion of a discourse, we shall try to see what constitutes a discourse about identity, what themes it helps it to congeal, and more importantly who articulates a discourse about cultural identity. Unlike Foucault's ubiquitous power which circulates and penetrates all ideas that are deployed within a social body, we are proposing that power has a predominant direction and it is the privilege of a certain social class. We shall study the nineteenth-century discourse on cultural identity as a shifting network of ideas taking multiple forms - spoken, written, performed, imagined and enacted. The multiplicity of cultural forms this discourse took indicates the pervasiveness of a cultural identity that later saw itself as embodying a significant proportion of what was labelled as the 'cultural heritage of India'. As we shall demonstrate in a later section, it was a hegemonical class which operated to fashion this particular cultural artifact as a self-defining Hindu discourse.

This thesis is concerned with prescriptive norms which originated in texts as well as in organisations and guided the standards that made up a Hindu identity within

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<sup>8</sup>Here I have partially adapted Foucault's delineation of the multiple factors that can produce a discourse. 'Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse, they are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which at once impose and maintain them.' Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, David Bouchard trans., Ithaca, 1977, p. 200.

the context of a colonial state. As with studies of discursive as opposed to actual practices, there are bound to be gaps between self-perceptions of what constituted appropriate Hindu demeanour in terms of a generalised identity and the actual life experience of being Hindu which signified different things to different sects. The annual Hindu Mela instituted in 1867 was an important centre that generated ecumenical articulations about a Hindu identity. Apart from its significant name, which literally means a 'gathering of Hindus', the Mela as we shall see brought about the crystallisation of a Bengali cultural identity in Hindu terms. Moreover, interestingly the organisation of the Mela itself can be seen as a metonymic representation of the interactive nature of the identity it encapsulated. For while it drew upon the popular cultural form of the 'Mela' - a fair - the organisational structure of the Hindu Mela adopted the Western idea of an organisation with its various sections and committees.

The significance of the Hindu Mela has been inadequately studied by scholars. The early work of Jogesh Chandra Bagal recorded its significance in nationalist terms,<sup>9</sup> but apart from Bagal, the organisational and patriotic aspects of the Mela have been referred to only in passing by scholars.<sup>10</sup> While earlier scholarship had generally tended to regard this organisation as a prefiguration of the Indian National Congress -

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<sup>9</sup>Jogesh Chandra Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, ('The History of the Hindu Mela'), 1945 rpt., Calcutta, 1968.

<sup>10</sup>See Charles H. Heimsath, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform, Princeton, 1964, p. 137, Nemai Sadhan Bose, The Indian Awakening and Bengal, Calcutta, 1969, pp. 222-4. By contrast Sumit Sarkar has stressed the economic aspects of the Mela linking it with later Swadeshi enterprise in The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908, New Delhi, 1973, p. 109.

the foremost political institution of nineteenth and twentieth-century India,<sup>11</sup> or stated its importance as an organisation that generated an infectious national spirit, without examining it in any detail,<sup>12</sup> recent studies have briefly considered it as an expression of elite culture in Calcutta society.<sup>13</sup> Although the profusion of political ideas in late nineteenth-century culture is a familiar theme in Indian history of this period, the various modes of cultural association and the interactions out of which a cultural identity was constructed deserve fuller consideration. The significance of the Hindu Mela in formulating this cultural identity therefore needs more detailed critical consideration.

Kopf's study of the Brahmo Samaj while examining some of the conflicts within the Samaj and relating them to the contemporary rise of cultural nationalism confounds the Mela with the Brahmo Samaj. Kopf's slighting treatment of the Mela as a response of the Tagore family to Keshab's universalism,<sup>14</sup> fails to offer an understanding of the complex dynamics of pervasive Hindu identity that often subsumed the Brahmo identity. It was, as we shall demonstrate, the hegemonic activities of a specific class of articulators that were enacted within a colonial context

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<sup>11</sup>See for example, R.C. Majumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol I, Calcutta, 1971, pp. 274-96. Also, Amitabha Mukherjee 'Genesis of Indian National Congress' in A Centenary History of the Indian National Congress (1885-1985), Vol I, Delhi, 1985.

<sup>12</sup>See Gautam Chattopadhyay, Bengal Electoral Politics and Freedom Struggle, 1862 - 1947, New Delhi, 1984.

<sup>13</sup>Sumanta Banerjee refers to it in his The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta, Calcutta, 1989, pp.74-5, 127, 194-5.

<sup>14</sup>David Kopf, The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind, Princeton, 1979, p. 184.

which subsequently produced a discourse that was Hindu in its general assumptions. It was articulated by Brahmos, Hindu reformers and at times, even aligned itself with the Hindu orthodoxy in its handling of some issues - the condemnation of the lack of religion in present-day Bengali society as the cause of its ruin, for instance.

While the Tagores of Jorasanko and Nabagopal Mitra were members of the Adi Brahmo Samaj, many of the Committee members were not. Also, the conceptualisation of the Hindu Mela as a common gathering for Hindus and its design were drawn from a more pervasive Hindu identity rather than from what Kopf calls Brahmo nationalism. Kopf's insistence on the Tagores' 'beautification' of their yearly national festival, the Hindu Mela, as the response of the Tagore family to Keshub's universalism,<sup>15</sup> reduces the broad themes of a self-consciously constructed Hindu identity into a mere Adi Brahmo Samaj display of cultural nationalism. Shibnath Shastri, an active member of the Brahmo Samaj, initiated by Keshub Chandra Sen, wrote about the Mela and its participants:

It was decided to hold a yearly Mela on the last day of Chaitra. Many respectable and noble people came forward with financial help. Among the supporters Raja Kamal Krishna Bahadur, Babu Ramanath Tagore, Babu Kashisvar Mitra, Babu Durga Charan Laha, Babu Pyari Charan Sarkar, Babu Girish Chandra Ghosh, Babu Krishnadas Pal, Babu Rajnarayan Basu, Babu Dwijendranath Tagore, Pandit Jaynarayan Tarkapanchanan, Pandit Bharatchandra Shiromani, Pandit Taranath Tarkabaschaspati are mentioned. Therefore the organisers had spared no efforts to include people from all fields.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from Shibnath Shastri's testimony, the list of Committee members of the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>16</sup>Shibnath Shastri, Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj, ('Ramtanu Lahiri and the Bengali Society of his day'), 1903, rpt. 4th edition, Calcutta, 1983, p. 230.



Mela of 1868, published in the National Paper, indicate that many members were not Brahmos. Debendranath Tagore had included amongst the Committee members, his uncle, Ramanath Tagore, step-brother of Dwarakanath Tagore. Despite Ramanath Tagore's early dedication to Rammohan Roy, his family continued Hindu ritual practices.<sup>17</sup> Again, Gonendranath Tagore, the active Secretary of the Mela, was the eldest son of Girindranath Tagore who unlike his brother Debendranath had remained Hindu. Both, Girindranath's Brahmin sons-in-law, Nil Kamal Mukhopadhyay and Yogesh Prakash Gangopadhyay, were Auditors in the 1868 Mela Committee. Nabagopal Mitra, the Assistant Secretary of the Mela Committee, on the other hand, was also the Assistant Secretary of the Calcutta Brahmo Samaj.<sup>18</sup> The Committee of 1868 also included pandits like Jay Narayan Tarkapanchanan, a Professor of Nyaya at Sanskrit College Calcutta, as well as men like Raibahadur Debendranath Mallik, the President of the Subarnabanik Association. What prompted the participation of this mix of Hindu, Adi Brahmo and Sadharan Brahmo Samaj members, was their self-constructed, generalised Hindu identity which they perceived as transcending narrow sectarian interests.

The missionary threat of conversion, fanned by the rejection of Hindu tradition

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<sup>17</sup>The biographer of Rabindranath Tagore tells us, that Rabindranath's mother Sarada Debi, used to send her offerings to the priest who performed Durga puja at the house of Ramanath Tagore. This was done without her husband knowing, for she had stopped offering worship in the Hindu way and had modified her beliefs to conform with her husband's Brahmo faith. See Prashant Kumar Pal, Rabi-Jibani, Vol I: 1861-77, Vol I, Calcutta, 1982, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup>Nabagopal was Assistant Secretary with Pandit Ananda Chandra Bidyabagish in 1868. See Thackers Directory for Bengal, the North West Provinces etc., for 1868, Calcutta, 1868, p. 201.

ushered in with Western education prompted a critical reassessment of Hindu tradition.

Rajnarayan Basu's 'Prospectus for A Society for the promotion of National Feeling Among the Educated Natives of Bengal'(1867), began with an anxiety about the rejection of tradition:

Already a band of young men have expressed a desire to sever themselves at once from Hindu Society and renounce even the Hindu name. It is to be feared that a revolution may sweep away whatever good we may have inherited from our ancestors. To prevent this catastrophe and to give a national shape to reforms, it is proposed that a Society be established by the influential members of native society for the promotion of national feelings among the educated natives of Bengal.<sup>19</sup>

The Hindu discourse which emanated out of such anxiety framed an identity in universalist terms - terms that could transcend religious signification. As we shall see in Chapter IV, the universalist dimension of this self-defining Hindu discourse was later presented on an international platform by Swami Vivekananda. The early stages of this self-definition were marked by the incorporation and appropriation of ideas deployed by European Orientalist scholars to describe the Indian heritage. The notion of the Aryan situated in the antiquity of Indian civilisation advanced by Orientalists became a predominant feature of the oppositional discourse on cultural identity. Yet the scope and meaning of this defining concept was constantly assessed and reinterpreted within this discourse. Dwijendranath Tagore in his celebrated lecture before the Chaitanya Library in 1882, offered a critical contemporary evaluation of the implications of the term Aryan as it was applied to India. All cultures, European or

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<sup>19</sup>Rajnarayan Basu, 'Prospectus for A Society for the Promotion of National Feeling among the Educated Natives of Bengal' reprinted in Jogesh Chandra Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, p. 91.

Indian, Dwijendranath asserted in 'Aryami banam Sahebiyana' ('Aryanism versus Westernisation') had norms that its members imbibed from childhood. Indians who had currently become obsessed with being Aryans were as much in the wrong as those that had become obsessed with imitating Europeans. However, Dwijendranath concluded that both sides had some noble aspects. While Aryanism inspired people to perform noble actions that were appropriate for an Aryan, the West was nurturing the civilisation of the future. The fusion of Western scientific attitude and Aryan spirituality would bring an end to India's misery.<sup>20</sup> This position, far from demonstrating the separateness of the indigenous and Western components of cultural identity reveals how the two were perceived to be compatible and complementary because of their mutual universalist dimensions. Indeed, the Hindu discourse which emerged in nineteenth-century Bengal saw itself as representing the nationalist and the universalist dimensions of an oppositional identity by incorporating elements of Orientalist constructions within its reconstructed framework. Dwijendranath's portrayal of the desirable form of cultural identity sounded itself in the Hindu Mela and in Nabagopal's National Paper.

According to an article in the National Paper, the Hindu was a very special and hence privileged, person, for he received his identity with the gift of life itself. Like the descendants of Abraham, 'no foreigner can be Hinduised as the numbers of the chosen people were confined to its own stock'.<sup>21</sup> However, the universalist dimension

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<sup>20</sup>Dwijendranath Tagore, Aryami banam Sahebiyana, ('Aryanism versus Westernisation'), Calcutta, 1882, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup>'Hindoo Nationality', National Paper, 17 June 1868, p. 302.

of religion was never lost sight of. In another article entitled 'Religion is Universal as well as National', the National Paper, asserted in 1868:

They are traitors to the cause of Religion who assert that the first and essential truths of Religion are not indelibly impressed upon the minds of every nation, people, race or tribe living and moving in the world. They are equally traitors ... who aver that because Religion is universal it cannot be national and who ... shew upto public derision and contempt men who give to every nation and creed and race the right and privilege to adapt into their own constitution, in their own way and form, the universal truths of Religion.<sup>22</sup>

The ambiguity of the stance taken by the National Paper is indicative of the complexities of the nineteenth-century religious ferment in Bengal. In its concern for the gross neglect of religious principles, the National Paper shared a common premise with the Bamabodhini Patrika, instituted by Keshab Chandra Sen. In fact the National Paper, which Kopf designates as propagating the views of the Adi Brahmo Samaj, was trying to arrive at an essentialist depiction of what constituted Hinduism and sometimes also associated itself with revivalist organisations like the Dharma Rakshini Sabha, which was founded in 1869 and purported to protect Sanatana Dharma from 'foreigners and Hindus who had converted'.<sup>23</sup> The Sabha founded under the 'permanent Presidency of Rajah Kali Krishna Bahadoor of Sobha Bazar' stated one of its primary rules in universal terms that viewed all 'incarnations' as expressions of the Divine: 'The object of the Sabha (or Religious conclave) is to uphold and protect the oldest Hindu orthodox principles of worshipping One supreme God and His

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<sup>22</sup>'Religion is Universal as well as National', National Paper, 22 January 1868, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup>Bharatbarshiya Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha: Dasam Masik Karya Bibaran, ('The Bharatbarshiya Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha: Monthly Proceedings, No. Ten'), Calcutta, 1869, p. 2.

Incarnations'.<sup>24</sup>

However, despite its difference with Brahmo theism, it eschewed traditional caste distinctions in terms similar to the Brahmo agenda: 'Discussions of castes to create party feelings are avoided and the national friendliness is maintained.'<sup>25</sup>

In this it also shared the objectives of the Hindu Mela. On the other hand, the National Paper saw the Sabha as emphasising the lack of religion and irreverence which were singled out as intensifying the chaos in contemporary society.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from such points of convergence Manomohan Basu, one of the chief organisers of the Mela, often repeated his lectures at the Mela at the Dharma Rakshini Sabha. Shibnath Shastri maintains that this derived from the intense religious ferment that characterised contemporary Bengal. Shastri writes:

At the initiative of the National Association, a lecture entitled 'The Superiority of Hinduism' was delivered. The President of the Adi Samaj, the respected Rajnarayan Basu gave that lecture and Maharshi Debendranath Tagore was Chairman. Within a short period, this lecture received a great deal of praise and disseminated in this country as well as in others. Excited by this, the members of the Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha and their President, Raja Kali Krishna Deb, began to persuade speakers like Manomohan Basu to lecture on the supremacy of the Hindu religion and its customs.<sup>27</sup>

Shibnath Shastri also mentions Raja Kamal Krishna Bahadur of Shobha Bazar, as one of the founders of the Dharma Rakshini Sabha. Kamal Krishna Bahadur was

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<sup>24</sup>The Bengal Directory for 1870, Calcutta, 1870, p. 199.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>26</sup>Reporting on the 'Dhurm Rakhani Sova' [sic!] in 1869, the National paper, wrote: 'If the Dhurm Rakhani Sova can by the inculcation of the Higher principles of Hindooism, teach the indifferent minds to be religious, we have every cause to feel satisfaction.' National Paper, 21 April 1869, p. 183.

<sup>27</sup>Shibnath Shastri, Ramtanu Lahiri, p. 273.

a member of the 1868 General Committee of the Hindu Mela. He remained associated with the Mela and would regularly chair sessions and give prizes. A part of Manomohan Basu's speech of which, entitled 'Hindu Achar Byabahar : Paribarik' ('Hindu Customs : Domestic'), was delivered at the National Association in 1871, and the second part, entitled 'Hindu Achar Byabahar : Samajik' ('Hindu Customs : Social') was read at the 1872 Hindu Mela. The fact that he also lectured at Kamal Krishna Bahadur's Sabha, again points to a pervasive and general concern with the identifying principles of Hinduism which characterised contemporary Bengal.<sup>28</sup> These various Sabhas may have been instituted with very different aims, by groups quite different from each other. But they shared the common concern with specific definitions in the field of nineteenth century cultural politics. This concern precipitated a certain kind of Hindu identity and sustained a network of ideas - a discourse about what defined a Hindu in cultural rather than religious terms.

### **Hindutva as a Cultural Construct**

Rajnarayan Basu's lecture on 'Hindu Dharmer Shresthata', or 'The Superiority of the Hindu Religion', before the National Association in 1872, began by defining what is meant by the term 'Hindu'. According to Rajnarayan, all Hindu Shastras proclaim in unison, that the worship of the Para-Brahma or the supreme Brahma constitutes

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<sup>28</sup>As Tapan Raychaudhuri points out the term 'Hindu revivalism' is misleading in this context. For the general attempt seems to be to awaken a sense of cultural identity rather than Hindu chauvinism. Tapan Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered, p. 9.

Hinduism. Rajnarayan then goes on to enumerate the distinguishing features of Hinduism. Rajnarayan's higher Hinduism had much in common with the Brahmo reconstruction of Hinduism, in that it rejected the theory of incarnations and the function of intermediaries in the path to salvation. However, Rajnarayan in locating Brahmoism as a refined Hinduism was articulating the attitude of Brahmo leaders like Debendranath Tagore who saw Hinduism as encompassing the Brahmo identity.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, Manomohan Basu's speeches on the social and domestic aspects of Hindu customs dealt with the problem of identity from a different perspective, though both share a common ground in their interactions with Western concepts. Rajnarayan's speech deployed abstract notions of what constitutes dharma, while Manomohan Basu depicted the custom and ritual practices of the Hindus as signifying specific aspects of being Hindu. In his defence of the marriage customs of the Hindus, Manomohan deployed a negative assessment of the caste system in order to confront the class-ridden society of England:

They boast that they do not have the shortcomings of the Hindus, like the caste-system and endogamy. By the grace of the Christian religion, they are free of such ignoble and ungodly customs and beholding all human beings as children of One Father, they are flooding the earth with their fraternal feelings.<sup>30</sup>

The obvious irony gives way to a critical assessment of the hierarchical class structure of English society:

However, all this consists of mere words, extraneous logic and superficial

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<sup>29</sup>See Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, Allahabad, 1916.

<sup>30</sup>Manomohan Basu, 'Hindu Achar Byabahar: Paribarik' in Hindu Achar Byabahar, Calcutta: 2nd edition, 1887, p. 35.

culture. If we were to dissect the innermost portion of their society, we will see a substantial lack of such heavenly words. Nowadays, England is the most civilised, freedom-loving, the most generous and hence merits our emulation. Yet even in such a country, the way in which the rich classes of lords and ladies look down upon other classes, especially the penniless labourer or petty-businessman, that it resembles the way in which a Chandal in our country, is treated by the Brahmin who has just completed his morning ablutions.<sup>31</sup>

In the second part of Manomohan's speech too the culture and civilisation of the West remains a constant referent. Comparing the two distinctive cultures he designated the Europeans as more civilised on the basis of their current progress. This was a conspiracy of Destiny, for in the past, he tells us, it was India which was the most civilised of all nations. However, the fact that Hindu society has religion deeply implanted within it and is not a society dependent on superficial matters, has protected it from total disintegration. Regeneration was therefore a possibility.

Even though many changes, both substantial and small have come about, the basic nature of the society has remained consistent. Its rudimentary disposition is a religious one. That religious element is still there. Because it is there, we are designated at least half-civilised.<sup>32</sup>

In Manomohan's depiction, a steadfast religiosity often conflated with spirituality, remained the identifiable characteristic of a Hindu. This abstract classificatory category was later given a specific direction by Vivekananda. But the discourse itself had congealed in certain specific ways long before Vivekananda's attempts at a cultural conquest of the West. Rajnarayan Basu's 'Briddha Hindur Asha' or 'The Hopes of an Old Hindu', published towards the end of the century, in fact

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>32</sup>Manomohan Basu, 'Hindu Achar Byabahar: Samajik' in Hindu Achar Byabahar, (Calcutta: 2nd edition, 1887), p. 84.



gave this Hindu cultural identity a vital edge which finds unfortunate echoes in present-day Hindu fundamentalist agendas. Written in English in 1881, the pamphlet was translated into Bengali in 1886 and appeared in the periodical Nabajiban.<sup>33</sup> This pamphlet can be seen as a progression from Rajnarayan's earlier 'Prospectus for the Society for the Promotion of National Feeling among the Educated Natives of Bengal', for it expressed a similar hope of spurring on the patriotism of Hindus. Rajnarayan envisaged an organisation for Hindus to give voice to their various grievances, as also to safeguard their economic interests. Rajnarayan's defining features of a Hindu illustrated the interactive matrix out of which such cultural definitions originated. He insisted that Hindutva does not depend on the food-habits or the dress of a culture. Who then is a Hindu? Rajnarayan's answer pointed to the syncretic identity that was in the process of construction. Firstly, Rajnarayan claimed an Aryan descent for the Hindus. In order to distinguish his position from the Orientalist one, from which it obviously derived, Rajnarayan pointed out that this effectively included all the subordinate groups that Indian Aryans had united under the term Aryan - therefore it signified the Brahmins of Madras as well as other subordinate groups. This necessarily precluded all communities that did not accept the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Eighteen Puranas as histories of their past. Thus Rajnarayan synthesised a concept of community<sup>34</sup>, using nineteenth-century Orientalist racial and textual terms: he

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<sup>33</sup>See Rajnarayan Basu, Atma Charit, Calcutta, 1908, p. 96.

<sup>34</sup>Here I use the word in Benedict Anderson's sense, but with an additional twist - the imagination that homogenises and draws this community together is not a discrete autonomous entity but the product of the interaction of Orientalist knowledge with an indigenous search for identity.

presented the notion of the common Aryan race of which Hindus are a part and the notion of texts which contain the genealogy of that community. Consistent with this was the third part of his definition: that Hindus are a community which shares a common mother-language - Sanskrit. Once more, drawing upon Orientalist research, he based this in the theory of the Indo-Aryan family of languages that saw most of the languages spoken by the Hindus in India as deriving from Sanskrit. To this Rajnarayan added those non-Aryan languages which had admitted many Sanskrit words. His final descriptive feature is the acceptance of one supreme godhead. By this definition, the Brahmos, the Sikhs, the Vaishnavas, the Kabir-panthis, the Nanak-panthis and Brahmos all took on a Hindu identity.<sup>35</sup>

Having defined the primary qualifications of membership to such a Samiti, Rajnarayan was careful to stress that this organisation should carry out its programme bearing in mind Victoria's declaration of November 1858. Later, we shall see how Victoria came to occupy a significant position within the preoccupation with motherhood in this emerging Hindu discourse. For the present, it is worth noting that Rajnarayan's nationalistic aim was located within the parameters of the Empire. Moreover, despite the fact that Rajnarayan was primarily concerned with defining Hindu characteristics, he was careful to strike a 'balance' and included the Muslims. Indeed Rajnarayan's proposals for a Hindu organisation was preceded by the foundation of the Central National Mohammedan Association in 1878 with the avowed

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<sup>35</sup>See Rajnarayan Basu, Bridgha Hindur Asha: Maha Hindu Samiti Name ek Maha Samiti Sthapaner Prastab, ('The Hopes of an Old Hindu': A Proposal to Establish a Grand Organisation called the Maha Hindu Samiti', Calcutta: 2nd Ed., 1892), pp. 6-7.

aim of morally reviving the Muslims though working in harmony with Western culture.<sup>36</sup> While Rajnarayan saw a political alliance with the Muslims to be desirable and necessary, he discarded the possibility of a united front:

Just as racial impediments should not hinder the political alliance of these two groups, the fact that any deep-rooted affiliation with our Muslim brothers is impossible, should not prevent us from establishing our Great Hindu Organisation for the benefit of Hindus.<sup>37</sup>

Rajnarayan's plan for the Great Hindu Committee was catalogued in significant details. Among the other essentials, Rajnarayan had visualised a flag with a lotus at the centre, predating its identification as the 'National' flower of India. Envisioning this as a pervasive movement, Rajnarayan described an organisational structure which includes local level organisations, regional organisations where business is conducted in the regional language and the central organisation where Hindi is to be used. The use of Hindi is intended to bring together the people of all provinces.<sup>38</sup> Finally, in his agenda, Rajnarayan defined the themes of speeches that should be given at meetings - speeches should include a recollection of the glorious Aryan past. The themes emphasised by Rajnarayan found expression in the literary output of the Hindu Mela which we shall discuss in a later section. It is also interesting to note the

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<sup>36</sup>For further information see A.H.M. Nooruzzaman, 'Rise of the Muslim Middle Class as a Political Factor in India and Pakistan', Ph.D thesis, University of London, 1964, pp. 135-7.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup>With reference to contemporary developments in India it may be worth pointing out that Rajnarayan thought Hindi should be the official language of such an organisation. Moreover, he mentioned that those who did not speak Hindi like the people of the Madras Presidency, should make every effort to learn the language. Rajnarayan Basu, Bridhha Hindur Asha, p. 29.

subterranean colonial demarcations for the articulation of such agendas: Rajnarayan included Satyendranath Tagore's song written for the Hindu Mela : 'Gao Bharater Jay' ('Sing: Victory to Bharat') together with Shourindra Mohan Tagore's translation of 'God Save the Queen'. Rajnarayan's grand design, although never translated into action, aided in the crystallisation of themes which became central to the oppositional discourse of Hindu cultural identity, themes from which the Muslim population of Bengal were excluded.<sup>39</sup>

Nor was Rajnarayan's an isolated attempt to marginalise the Muslim population in Bengal. An article in Manomohan Basu's journal Madhyastha, in 1873, had foreshadowed Rajnarayan's attitude. Answering criticisms against the National Association, a body precipitated by the Hindu Mela in 1870,<sup>40</sup> for not including Muslims or Christians, the article asserted:

Dwelling in the same country does not necessarily mean that you belong to the same nation. And just because there are many nationalities in the country, it does not follow that the Hindus cannot append the epithet 'National' to their own gathering. The Hindus are the ancient inhabitants of this land and they have lived here for thousands and thousands of years; they are also the majority, even if they are defeated as a nation this is their country; not the rash usurpers, but only the Hindus are the true, legitimate children of the Bharat Mata. No matter who confiscates their wealth, their dignity, their freedom, their princely status, their landed property, the Hindus will still retain the right to use the adjective 'National'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>The reverse side of this process of alienation is discussed by Rafiuddin Ahmed. Islamisation together with the insistence on a separate language had produced a distinctive cultural conflict whereby 'Hindus alone were "Bengalis", the Muslims being only "Muslims", liberated from all local ethnic affiliations.' See Rafiuddin Ahmed, The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity, Oxford, 1988, pp. 106-32.

<sup>40</sup>Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, p. 61.

<sup>41</sup>'Jatiya Bhab O Jatiya Anusthan', Madhyastha, February 1873, p. 703.

With the terms 'National' and 'Hindu' thus fused together the article further claimed the indestructible 'religion-based culture' had long lain dormant and was now being aroused by the national activities of people like Nabagopal Mitra.<sup>42</sup>

Several things emerge from our discussion of the preoccupation with Hindu culture, patriotism and their point of intersection. Nineteenth-century Bengal was characterised by a deep religious ferment and despite the controversies within the Brahmo Samaj which resulted in several splits, and the various differences between the Dharma Sabha and the Hindu Mela; there also existed attempts at forging a cultural identity which would be characterised by a refined, redefined Hinduism as well as by its attachment to a Western scientific spirit. In the following section, we shall look at the deployment of defining themes from the perspective of negative colonial assessment and class hegemony. The rise of cultural nationalism had its roots in the interactive matrix of notions of what constituted tradition for Indian Aryans - in Orientalist ideas, official debates as well as Brahmo and Hindu self-critical postures. This cultural nationalism was embodied in all branches of the activities organised by the Hindu Mela, which also demonstrated the dynamic role played by the English educated middle-class.

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 705.

## Instituting a Common Gathering: Class, Hegemony and the Hindu Mela

Unfortunately, few original proceedings of the Mela have survived.<sup>43</sup> The invaluable contribution of Shubhendu Shekhar Mukhopadhyay, in reprinting the original proceedings and the compositions that were awarded at the Mela from 1868 - 1870<sup>44</sup>, has made it possible to appreciate the profusion of concepts that constituted nineteenth century Bengali Hindu cultural identity and emanated from and informed this gathering. Apart from these, related aspects of this significant gathering have been gleaned from contemporary newspaper reports, memoirs, autobiographies as well as reports and advertisements that appeared in the National Paper. The Mela had its roots in the foundation of the National Paper in 1865 by Debendranath Tagore, who assigned its editorship to Nabagopal Mitra. Thus patronised by the Tagores of Jorasanko, the Chaitra Mela, later the Hindu Mela, began functioning in April 1867 with the 'National' Nabagopal Mitra as its chief organiser.<sup>45</sup> It was translated, interestingly, by its organisers into English as 'The National Gathering' though it literally meant 'A Gathering for Hindus'. The conflation of meaning that was thus opened up, between being Hindu and having a nationalist identity, existed even within

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<sup>43</sup>Hindu Melar Bibaran O Purashkrita Rachanabali, 1790 Sakya, Calcutta: 1869. In this chapter, however, I shall refer to the reprint of these proceedings edited by Shubhendu Shekhar Mukhopadhyay. See fn 44.

<sup>44</sup>See Shubhendu Shekhar Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran: 1789-1791 Sakya', ('Description of the Hindu Mela: 1868-1870'), Sahitya Parishat Patrika, 1960, Vol 69: Nos. 2, 3-4, pp. 106-160, pp. 204-92, pp. 294-98.

<sup>45</sup>Nabagopal Mitra was referred to as 'National' Mitra in contemporary circles. Manomohan Basu said of him in Madhyastha February 1873 : 'He indeed is the awakened National!' Quoted in Jogesh Chandra Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, p. 60.



the agenda of the Mela in more than one sense. Sumanta Banerjee in his recent study of marginalisation of Calcutta's popular culture by its elite, remarks that the Mela was 'an effort by the Bengali bhadralok to rally members of their own class into a coherent social organisation.'<sup>46</sup> Banerjee, however, by locating the professed culture of the Mela as sharply polarising towards elite culture, ignores the ambiguities within the programme of the Mela. This chapter will look closely at what underlay the agenda of the Hindu Mela and try to explore in some detail, the hegemonic activities of the bhadralok around the Mela and its organisation. The agenda of the Mela and what underlay it, serves as an example of a hegemonising middle-class that was struggling to gain power within a colonially demarcated space.

The Hindu Mela was earlier known as the Chaitra Mela as it took place on the last day of Bengali year. It came to be labelled the Hindu Mela from its fourth year, 1870 and its agenda, though prominently patriotic, was basically for Hindus with the exceptional participation of the Muslim musician Maula Baksh, which we shall turn to later. Drawing upon the traditional celebration of the Chaitra Sankranti festival, the organisers took great pains to explain to its first audiences its cultural rather than religious agenda. In 1870, the National Paper noted that the Mela had attracted 20,000 visitors on its second day that year.<sup>47</sup> Nabagopal Mitra in his report that year said that 'it is clear that the Hindoo Mela has been the means of uniting all classes of the community in one common bond'.<sup>48</sup> Prior to this, one of the earliest announcements

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<sup>46</sup>Banerjee, The Parlour and the Street, p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> National Paper, 23 February 1870, Supplement, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup>'The National Gathering', National Paper, 2 March 1870, p. 90.

of the Mela that appeared in the National Paper on 10 April 1867, refers to the class composition of its supporters:

We have unfeigned satisfaction to state for the information of our readers, that the movement for a National Gathering, proposed by us, bids fair to be a reality, thanks to the warm support and patronage of all classes of the Hindoo Community, the rich as well as the middle.<sup>49</sup>

That the organisers and supporters saw themselves as pioneering a noteworthy cultural movement with themselves as the self-styled leaders becomes clear in another article in the National Paper published in 1870:

It so happens that for every object of public improvement that is to be promoted, there is none besides that particular class of men to do the needful ... No nation or society can improve unless the bulk of that nation or society learns to sympathise with each other in common objects of interest. But to establish that sympathy there must be a few earnest and energetic souls devoted to the task.<sup>50</sup>

Thus within their own self-perception the elite and middle-class organisers of this gathering saw themselves as the earnest souls selflessly devoted to a national cause. In the significant space occupied by the Hindu Mela, ideas were projected about what constituted a 'true' Indian conceptually interwoven with the multiple notions of being a Bengali, an Aryan and a Hindu. One of the purposes of this gathering, was to unite various classes of Hindus and inspire them with confidence in their capacity for self-reliance. The concern for entrepreneurship, small-scale industry, crafts, etc., that expressed itself within the Mela, was equally balanced by the concern for 'national' music, literature and dramatic performances. But an overarching theme that

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<sup>49</sup>'The National Gathering', National Paper, 10 April 1867, p. 173.

<sup>50</sup>'The National Gathering', National Paper, 9 March 1870, p. 98.



ran through all the segments of its activities was the present-day diminished capacity for physical courage among Bengalis. A special branch within the Mela devoted to physical culture was also instituted. It was this idea that led Nabagopal not only to found a gymnasium<sup>51</sup> but also a circus.<sup>52</sup> Like all other sections that made up this gathering, this too was designed to emphasise indigenous as opposed to Western methods of cultivating physical strength.<sup>53</sup> With this stress on physical exercise and recovery of courage coexisted the Mela's efforts to recall for its participants the heroic Hindus of the past. This constant and incessant emphasis on the need for heroism and physical courage, thus enabled a masking of the colonially derived anxiety about the weak and effete Bengali male. However, this compensatory imaging of the valiant Hindu, far from being constructed in isolation, was a significant correlate of the image of the Bharat Mata - the heroic mother of dauntless sons - an icon we shall consider in some detail in Chapter III.<sup>54</sup>

Sumanta Banerjee in his study of elite and popular culture has critiqued the Hindu Mela for its elitist disposition for he says, that its appeal was directed 'not to

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<sup>51</sup> See Bipin Chandra Pal, Memories of My Life and Times: Volume I: In the Days of My Youth, Calcutta, 2nd edition 1973, pp. 213-14.

<sup>52</sup> Abanindra Nath Tagore, Gharoa, ('Conversations at Home') in Abanindra Rachanabali: I ('Collected Works of Abanindra Nath Tagore: Vol I'), Calcutta, 1973, p. 119. Nabagopal apparently had to mortgage his house to organise this circus. See Subodh Sengupta ed., Samsad Bangali Charitabhidhan, ('Biographical Dictionary of Bengalis'), Calcutta, 1976, p. 238.

<sup>53</sup> See Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran', p. 150.

<sup>54</sup> Satyendranath Tagore's song composed for the Mela imagined: 'This land that has conceived the brave, this Mother of heroes; Bondage has brought on darkness...' in Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran', p. 107.

all classes of Bengali Hindus, but only to the "educated fringe" of the community ... In turning to the past Hindu royalty of northern India, the educated elite's concept of national feeling excluded the masses of the lower orders of contemporary Bengal.<sup>55</sup> However, to ignore the ways in which the Hindu Mela sought to organise and validate its identity, by ostensibly 'including' the subordinate Hindu groups and speaking on their behalf, is to overlook the hegemonising aspects of this organisation. For apart from the preoccupation with heroism and physical strength, one of its avowed projects was to consolidate a hegemonic Hindu identity in Bengal by perceiving itself as an agency which would successfully unite the various classes of Hindus. This purpose was affirmed, as we shall see, by the speeches and inaugural lectures which constituted the annual programme of the Mela. Incidentally, although Nabagopal published the National Paper in English, he 'was proud even of his ungrammatical and unidiomatic English',<sup>56</sup> as many of the extracts quoted here will prove. Faulty English he claimed was part of his nationalism and in the grammatically incorrect announcement of the first Mela, referred to earlier, great stress was laid on the difficulty of inculcating national feelings amongst a highly differentiated Hindu community:

The Hindoo society divided into different sects and creeds, possessing divergent feelings and notions, is seldom found to move in a national cause. To place it in a position to do so, is to increase its strength, glory, efficiency and power are other objects bearing upon the grand object of the National movement.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Banerjee, The Parlour and the Street, pp. 74-5.

<sup>56</sup>Bipin Chandra Pal, Memories of My Life and Times, I, p. 213.

<sup>57</sup>'The National Gathering', National Paper, 10 April 1867, p. 173.

One of the ways the Mela sought to achieve this was by including in its Exhibition section craftsmen from the villages and paiks or foot-soldier and lathiyals or fencers with bamboo-staves, in its Physical Culture Section. Manomohan Basu, who chaired many of the lecture sessions at the Mela, significantly remarked in his address to the second Hindu Mela in 1868:

Today, we have had to go and invite the artisans, farmers, gardeners, musicians, singers, paiks and the wrestlers. Today, we had to literally go from door to door to collect artifacts and other exhibits. Let us wait for the day when all these men and material come on their own - let us look forward to weavers of Dhaka and Shantipur, the craftsmen of Kashi (Benaras) and Kashmir, the sculptors of Jaipur and Lucknow, the potter of Chandalgargh and Kumartuli, the farmers of Patna; in short, the like-minded businessmen, artisans and talented people from the north and the south, from the east and the west - let them all come ... When you see these people recognising the awards accorded by this festival as invaluable and incomparable, when people start having faith in this festival as an arena of national pride, only then can you conclude that this newly planted tree has begun to bear fruit.<sup>58</sup>

Was this anxiety to include the rural population a part of the middle-class effort at constructing a cultural idiom that would unite themes, icons, rhythms that belonged to the urban and educated class with the peasantry who were closer to the soil? We need to explore this apparent eagerness to include the rural sector in some depth because it is an important indicator of the nature of indigenous hegemony under colonial rule. The interactions and the maintenance of alliances with other social classes by a rising middle-class which saw itself as the self-styled leaders of a cultural revolt, fashioned the hegemonising activities of this class. In their efforts they enlisted the patronage of the upper class - zamindars for instance - and spoke on behalf of the

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<sup>58</sup>Manomohan Basu, 'Baktrita: Melar Uddeshe', ('Address at the Mela'), 1868, in Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran', pp. 141-2.

subordinate classes. Therefore, the dichotomy between elite and popular culture that Banerjee so authoritatively interprets for nineteenth-century Calcutta, is riddled with ambivalences when we turn to the Hindu Mela.

Apart from the Calcutta Mela, attempts were made as early as 1871 to organise similar gatherings in the districts and mofussil towns. The Baruipur Mela was organised shortly after the fifth Hindu Mela. Later, in May that year, another Mela was organised in Dinajpur.<sup>59</sup> At Baruipur in the 24 Parganas, the assistance of the zamindars in organising the gathering was openly acknowledged.<sup>60</sup> That the organisers relied on the zamindars and the educated few at the district level is borne out in a letter written to Gonendranath Tagore by Rajnarayan Basu. Rajnarayan sees the nationalist dimensions of the Mela as dependent on the gentry: 'I think it would be better to make Choitro Mela a properly national undertaking and solicit subscriptions from the Mofussil Gentry (Zemindars and Co.) inviting them annually by public advertisement to attend the Mela'.<sup>61</sup>

The local zamindars were seen as important participants not only from the point of view of patronage but also on account of having the power to draw the ryots into this spectacle. At the Baruipur Mela, the nature of the exhibits - mainly handicrafts and farm-products - indicated the participation of the farmers. In its

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<sup>59</sup>Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, p. 26.

<sup>60</sup>Manomohan Basu, in his speech at the Baruipur Mela, said that he was pleased that the zamindars of Baruipur were sensitive to the needs of the small farmers in their area. See Manomohan Basu, 'Baruipur Melar Baktrita', Baktrita Mala, Calcutta, 1873, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup>Letter from Rajnarayan Basu to Gonendranath Tagore, dated 28 January 1869, rpt. Binay Ghosh, Samayik Patre Banglar Samaj Chitra Vol. II, Calcutta, 1963, p. 632-3.

organisation and more specially within the discursive field it created for itself, the Mela's organisers sought to incorporate their social subordinates. This was not only a response to colonial allegations about the lack of a unified identity but also an expression of the underlying hegemonic project. By including the subordinate classes within the parameters of its cultural identity, the middle-class articulators of this discourse could categorise and assign specific functions to the subordinate classes, while reserving for themselves the right to administer and direct. Thus through a reading of the ostensible purpose of the Mela against the grain, it becomes possible to see the dislocations and gaps between the avowed purpose and the actual functioning of such an institution. This is further clarified when these overt aims are read against anxiety-ridden articles about the sufferings of the middle class.

An article published in the National Paper in 1869, entitled 'The Woes of the Middle Class', further illustrated this anxiety:

Who can count the woes of the middle class of the people ... the Missionaries and philanthropists of all descriptions stand in [sic!] behalf of the Ryots ... Woe to him who was not born a rich nor a poor man in India! In the former case he would have felt no necessity for help. In the latter he could have easily helped himself by honest labour.<sup>62</sup>

The self-perception of the middle-class as an endangered species whose means of livelihood did not seem to concern either the colonial state or philanthropists points to two things. On the one hand, it expressed a resentment about what is seen as an overwhelming concern for protecting the ryot and on the other a grim self-critical account of the middle-class's own lack of enterprise and capacity for hard work. The

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<sup>62</sup>'The Woes of the Middle Class', The National Paper, 11 August 1869, p. 377.

lack of concern for the peasantry displayed by the first Indian members to the Bengal Legislative Council in 1862 was reflected in their support of legislative measures to guard against peasant unrest.<sup>63</sup> The history of the 'new' middle class in urban Calcutta, as in other Presidency towns, was 'bound up with the history of the growth of a new social economy, the state administrative system, and modern educational institutions in India during the British period'.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, this urban middle class had come into existence with the colonial administration.<sup>65</sup> In this context, it is worth recalling Broomfield's oft-quoted definition the bhadralok as a cultural elite:

a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment, keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high caste prescriptions and its command of education: sharing a pride in its language, its literature, culture and its history; and maintaining its communal integration through a fairly complex institutional structure that it had proved remarkably able to adapt and augment to extend its social power and political opportunities.<sup>66</sup>

Despite Broomfield's definition, this privileged section saw itself in terms of a middle-class rather than an elite group. Both in the self-descriptive categories it deployed and in its socio-economic roots the nineteenth-century Bengali intelligentsia, as Sarkar has pointed out 'diligently cultivated the self-image of a 'middle-class'

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<sup>63</sup>Gautam Chattopadhyay, Bengal Electoral Politics, p. 11. Chattopadhyay analyses the support given to the European planters within the Bengal Council in terms of the self-interest of earliest Bengali Hindu councillors, who were English-educated 'reformers', belonging to the landed upper class.

<sup>64</sup>Arvind Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Bombay, 1948, p. 159.

<sup>65</sup>The growth of the middle class also meant 'a growth and extension of specialised groups in the public services and the other recognised professions.' B.B. Misra, The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times, Delhi, 1961, p. 213.

<sup>66</sup>John H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal, Berkeley, 1968, pp. 12-13.

(madhyabitta-sreni), below the zamindars but above the toilers'.<sup>67</sup>

The process which enabled the emergence of a Hindu discourse in nineteenth century Bengal, was stimulated by the modality by which this 'consciously superior group' extended its 'social power and political opportunities'. Zealously protecting its self-interests, in the discursive constructions that we are concerned with, even when a concern for the ryot (the poor tenant farmer), was expressed it was basically a paradoxical stance.<sup>68</sup> The educated bhadralok saw himself as distinct from the ryot and the manual labourer, and made a living from his government job or his profession. However, the contemporary middle class also saw itself as losing out on an important front - viz., enterprise. An often repeated theme is the lack of independent enterprise, as the newspapers of this period attest.<sup>69</sup> This can be understood as A.K. Bagchi has pointed out, in the context of changes in the relation of business collaboration between Indians and Europeans brought about by industrial capitalism in Britain, as well as on account of political and financial arrangements. To quote him:

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<sup>67</sup>Sumit Sarkar, Modern India: 1885-1947, Delhi, 1985, p. 67.

<sup>68</sup>In this context Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's long essay 'Bangadesher Krishak' ('The Peasant of Bengal' in Banga Darshan, 1872), is of particular interest. Shibaji Bandyopadhyay, has analysed the contradictions within this significant piece where Bankim sympathises with the ryot and simultaneously expresses his appreciation of the English and the zamindars. See Shibaji Bandyopadhyay, Gopal-Rakhal Dvandvasamas : Upanibeshbad O Bangla Shishusahitya, ('An Elision of Gopal and Rakhal : Colonial Literature and Bengali Juvenile Literature'), Calcutta, 1991, pp. 15-30.

<sup>69</sup>As an article in the National Paper, 14 August 1867, put it: 'Enterprise is the secret of success of all undertakings. Enterprise is money. Enterprise is power. Enterprise is the soul of man.' p. 387. Commenting the opposition faced by exceptional, enterprising Indians from Europeans, The Bharat Mihir, a weekly from Mymensingh, stated in 1876: 'should any one of the natives engage in any commercial enterprise it will invariably be the endeavour of the English mercantile community to thwart him.' See Report of the Native Newspapers: Bengal, (hereafter RNP), No. 4 of 1876, p. 1.

The confidence of the wealthy Indian in the benefits of collaboration with the British had already been shaken by the failure of the European agency houses in the early years of the 1830s when Indian creditors were very badly hit ... the further development of London as the centre of the world money market, and of eastern India as the major supplier of exports to Europe and the new colonies, helped European businessmen to oust Indians from positions of partnership.<sup>70</sup>

By the second-half of the nineteenth century, the neglect of indigenous industry and enterprise was perceived as a loss of freedom. This sense of failure was further heightened by the limits of success that could be achieved in administrative posts. A silver lining to this sense of inadequacy, however, was a common belief in the leadership which would enable a recovery. In fact the objective of the Hindu Mela, organised by the 'respectable Hindoo gentlemen' of Calcutta, was as Gonendranath Tagore put it: 'to establish a feeling of healthy nationality in the native community and to promote works of national improvement by native agency'.<sup>71</sup>

By the 1870s, however, this class in Bengal was articulating a sense of doom, which arose from anxiety about the future. With the limited openings in administrative posts and the lack of employment in the Indian Army, organisations such as the Hindu Mela, created the space for the articulation of this anxiety as also for the flaunting of an oppositional self. Within this discourse, anxiety and hope coexisted. As an article in The National Paper, in 1867, lamented:

Wages of labor do increase and must increase as civilisation increases, but it strikes us as strange that there should be a decrease in the number of such laborers at the rate it has diminished, so much so that for a middle class man to get good khansahmas, barbers or washermen is treated as quite an accidental

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<sup>70</sup>Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Private Investment in India: 1900-1939, Cambridge, 1972, p.197.

<sup>71</sup>Advertisement for 'Choitromela' in The National Paper, 18 March 1868, p.144.



circumstance.<sup>72</sup>

Manomohan Basu, in a later lecture given before the National Association in 1874, situated the deteriorating middle class at the heart of the crisis facing Bengal. Indeed Manomohan himself, though little noticed by scholars, was a typical example of the nineteenth century bhadralok - an urban educated professional with rural roots. Although he hailed from a village in Jessore, in eastern Bengal, he was educated in Calcutta and began a career in journalism in the city. Beginning as a regular contributor to the newspaper Sambad Prabhakar, edited by the poet Isvarchandra Gupta, he later published a bi-weekly, the Sambad-Bibhakar between 1852 and 1853. However, he is best remembered for his significant weekly, the Madhyastha, which aimed at integrating the 'old' with the 'new' and was first published on 13 April 1872.

Manomohan's lecture before the National Association was reprinted in Madhyastha in September-October 1874, shortly after he had delivered it. Classifying the landless into six categories, he demonstrated that the skilled workers and craftsmen, small businessmen, entrepreneurs and priests had gained under the present system of British rule. But he noted regretfully, the present state of the middle-class compared to the other classes. Due to British influence, most bhadralok and even some labourers had taken to wearing shoes, to the gain of the tanners and leather-workers. European and Chinese shoe traders employed Indian workers, and therefore this community had prospered.<sup>73</sup> In the sixth category he placed the employed,

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<sup>72</sup>'A Want in Native Society', The National Paper, 2 October 1867, p. 471.

<sup>73</sup>Manomohan Basu, 'Amader Anna Bastrer Upay Ki?' ('How shall we Procure our Food and Clothing?') Madhyastha, September-October, 1874, p. 222.

classifying them into servants and bhadralok. The problems of the former, stem from the upward mobility encouraged by the spread of education, as 'low-born' men are no longer content with being servants. The crisis that faces the bhadra or respectable classes stems from the 'democratic' spread of education amongst the lower castes. The article concluded that the country did not need an excess of clerks, school teachers or pandits, but it did need more enterprising and educated young men.<sup>74</sup> Read in conjunction with the anxiety about the lack of khansamas or cooks, barbers and washermen in the article in the National Paper, Manomohan's conclusion pointed to the ways in which upward mobility amongst subordinate social groups would result in further restrictions in opportunities for the middle classes.

The same concern is echoed in a later anonymous work now ascribed to Haranath Bhanja. Haranath's book entitled Suraloke Banger Parichay or 'A Presentation of Bengal in Elysium' was published in two parts in 1875 and 1877. In this fantasy-piece, the spirits of eminent Bengalis like, Jay Narayan Tarkapanchanan, Shambhunath Pandit, Kishorichand Mitra, Justice Dwarakanath Mitra, Ramgopal Ghosh and Prasanna Kumar Tagore meet in heaven with the spirit of the prominent Bengali entrepreneur, Prince Dwarakanath Tagore. That these men were perceived as representing the height of Bengali achievement is borne out by contemporary newspaper reports as also in Nabagopal Mitra's annual report before the 1868 Hindu Mela, where he recorded the deaths of eminent, Indian 'jewels' like Radhakanta Deb,

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., pp. 247-50.

Shambhunath Pandit, Premchand Tarkabagish and Ramgopal Ghosh.<sup>75</sup>

The evocation of the Prince here stands as a reminder to Bengalis of their continuing failure in this respect since the arrival of the British. The lure of administrative posts, together with the 'democracy' of English education had disturbed the established hierarchy in indigenous society. Elaborating on this, the spirit of Kashiprasad Ghosh (1809-1873), poet, journalist, Honourary Magistrate and Justice of the Peace, alleges:

The brahmin who offered worship, the washerman, the artisan, the weaver, the confectioner and all classes irrespective of high and low, have caused great harm to the kayastha by taking up modern-day work i.e, jobs as clerks and accountants. The confectioner by becoming a clerk has made the sandesh tasteless. The farmers, by becoming clerks have done great harm to the yield of grain. One does not know what the state of food-grain will be in future. Indigenous weapons are no longer as sharp as in the past; and how can they be when the blacksmiths are becoming clerks. They no longer care for the trades typical to their caste.<sup>76</sup>

The concern voiced here for the lack of commitment on the part of the subordinate castes to their trade, reveals the nineteenth-century middle-class anxiety about the disarray into which the established social hierarchy has been thrown. This concern for disruption in the social hierarchy brought about by the demand for jobs in the colonial administration as accountants and clerks, expresses the anxiety felt by a class that had struggled in the early period of colonialism to gain power within the novel framework of the British administration.

This self-fashioned middle-class identity, moreover, cut across caste identity

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<sup>75</sup>Nabagopal Mitra, 'Brief Report' in Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran', p. 113.

<sup>76</sup>Alok Ray ed., Suraloke Banger Parichay, Vol I, 1875, rpt. Calcutta, 1976, p. 10.

as S.N. Mukherjee has demonstrated in his analysis of the role of caste, class and politics in Calcutta between 1815 and 1838:

Although the bhadralok was almost exclusively a Hindu group, caste had no part in the selection; men who held a similar economic position, enjoyed a similar style of living and received a similar education were considered as bhadralok....Those who could acquire enough wealth, English education, and high status through administrative skill, and economic incentives, they formed the bulk of the bhadralok.<sup>77</sup>

At the time of the first Hindu Mela, in 1867, most of these families had already established themselves and their anxiety about facing competition from subordinate class and caste groups who were only now mastering the technique of becoming upwardly mobile, speaks of their uneasiness about their own social stability which they some of them had established only thirty years earlier.<sup>78</sup> The Committee members of the second Hindu Mela, as announced in the National Paper between March 18 and April 8 1868 (appearing as a full-page announcement four times in this period) shows on analysis that most of the active participants were either from influential families of Calcutta or had been working in a profession or administration post.<sup>79</sup> Amongst the zamindars, it included Kamal Krishna Bahadur, as well as

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<sup>77</sup>S.N. Mukherjee, 'Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-38' in Calcutta: Myths and History, Calcutta, 1977, p. 31. See also, Ranu Basu, 'Some Aspects of the Composition of the Urban Elite in Bengal 1850-1872' in Studies on Bengal, 1975, pp. 107-123.

<sup>78</sup>S.N. Mukherjee mentions that the dalpatis who were influential in social and public activities began to lose control 'with the introduction of the elective principles, first in Calcutta Corporation, then in the Bengal Legislative Council, and with the influx of East Bengali students and the migration of many new bhadralok families into the city' See S.N. Mukherjee, 'Daladali in Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century' in Calcutta: Myths and History, p. 85.

<sup>79</sup>It included Babu Ishvar Chandra Ghoshal, Deputy Magistrate of Shantipur who chaired a session at the 1869 Mela. Ishvar Chandra had expressed his loyalty to the colonial authorities during the Mutiny when he had 'offered himself to go anywhere for the services of the Government and received thanks for the same.' Quoted in The Mutinies and the People

Maharaja Digambar Mitra who had risen from the position of manager of the Kasimbazar zamindari.<sup>80</sup> Amongst the professional men, it included the journalist Grish Chunder Ghose who had established The Bengalee in 1862, and the journalist and orator Krishnadas Pal who had risen from humble roots. There was also the enterprising Durga Charan Laha who had founded the Calcutta City Banking Corporation in 1863 as well as the Dacca journalist Kali Prasanna Ghosh who served as a peshkar (or petitioner), in the Dacca Lower Court. The Committee members included eminent teachers like Pyari Charan Sarkar and Raj Narayan Basu, whose rise to success had been largely dependent on their education, and/or the administrative posts they held under the British government.

Mukherjee's analysis of an earlier generation of Calcutta bhadralok shows that the middle-class comprising 'large shopkeepers, small landholders and white-collar workers in commercial houses and government offices, teachers, 'native doctors', journalists and writers ... were not rich but comfortable ... and followed the rich and imitated their life-style.'<sup>81</sup> Although this was true of the 1860s, the rise of the middle group and their active participation in provincial events aided in the formation of a cohesive social stratum highly self-conscious of its existence as a group that would in the near future exercise considerable power as the leaders of what they perceived

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or Statements of Native Fidelity exhibited during the Outbreak of 1857-58, by 'A Hindu', Calcutta, 1859, p. 152. R.C. Majumdar has identified this anonymous Hindu as Sambhuchandra Mukhopadhyay. See Majumdar, The History and Culture of the Indian People: British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance, Bombay, 1963, p. 625.

<sup>80</sup>The Nababarshiki of 1877, a Bengali Year Book had stressed the self-made nature of men such as Raja Digambar Mitra and Krishnadas Pal. Nababarshiki, Calcutta, 1877, p. 215.

<sup>81</sup>Mukherjee, 'Caste, Class and Politics', pp. 22-3.

to be a coherent 'nation'. It was this abstract promise of power that brought the organising group of the Hindu Mela together. This power was seen as the end product of a national struggle. However, the formation of this idea of a nation precluded not only the large Muslim population of Bengal but also as the appeal of events like the Hindu Mela was generally Bengali in character, other linguistic Hindu groups became marginalised. Yet, the formulation of what constituted Hindu norms, in nineteenth-century Bengal, remained riddled with contradictions. The apparent lack of martial qualities in the Bengalis resulted in an admiring glance sideways at Maratha, Rajput and Sikh history, as we shall see in Chapter II. In the context of the Hindu Mela, the stress on the display of physical prowess was itself a defiance of the colonial categorisation of Bengalis as a 'non-martial' race. However, this very act of resistance was basically premised on the colonial rationale of distinguishing certain Indian races as martial and denigrating the Bengalis as a race of weak clerks. In its Physical Education Section, the Hindu Mela attempted to forward an oppositional notion of the Hindu Bengali and to this aspect of the Hindu Mela we shall now turn.

### **Demonstrating Physical Prowess: Reclaiming the Martial Temperament**

The reorganisation of the Indian army after the Mutiny of 1857 closely followed a pattern of recruitment from what came to be known as the 'martial races'. The theory itself was advocated and put into practice by Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief

of the Indian Army between 1885 and 1893.<sup>82</sup> The codification of this theory went hand in hand with the definitions of masculinity as the fighting instinct was seen as the appropriate expression of manliness.<sup>83</sup> However, the exclusion of Bengalis from the Indian army had a longer history and had given rise to the stereotype of the effete, unmilitary and cowardly Bengalis.<sup>84</sup> The exclusion of the Muslims of Bengal, as we shall see in the next chapter, did not enter the Hindu discourse as it traced its heroic ancestry. The long-term exclusion from the army, with the added gloss of being designated non-martial from the 1880s onwards simply intensified the sense of humiliation. This slight was further reinforced by a related classification by which the Bengali Babu was seen as effeminate and weak. The vehemence with which such a categorisation was received is evident in newspaper articles which attempted to counter this 'false' categorisation.

In 1867, The National Paper carried an article on 'Can the Bengalees be a Military Nation?' This argued against colonial allegations that the Bengalis under foreign rule, were degenerate in mind and body being under foreign rule, that they

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<sup>82</sup>One of the earliest analytical studies of this theory was by Nirad C. Chaudhuri, 'The "Martial Races" of India', The Modern Review, 1930, Vol XLVIII:1, pp. 41-51, Vol XLVIII:3, pp. 295-307.

<sup>83</sup>David Omissi, The Sepoy and the Raj: A Social and Political History of the Indian Army, 1860 - 1940, Publication forthcoming, Chapter I, passim.

<sup>84</sup>For analysis of this stereotype and the manner in which it shaped nationalism see John Rosselli, 'The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal', in *Past and Present*, 86, 1980, pp. 121-48. This stereotype has been explored as a means of rationalising colonial rule by Mrinalini Sinha, 'Colonial Policy and the Ideology of Moral Imperialism in Late Nineteenth-Century Bengal' in Michael S. Kimmel (ed.), Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity, Newbury Park, California, 1987, pp. 217-231.

were of a speculative disposition, they married early and hence their offspring were weaklings, that they lacked enterprise and daring and that they were physically weak and effeminate. While dismissing the first two as untrue, the article granted some responsibility to child marriage, although it asserted that social reform was rapidly changing the custom of child marriage. The discussion on the evils of child marriage, as we shall see in Chapter IV, informed the construction of an alternative masculinity in the icon of the celibate sannyasi. The article in the National Paper, argued that while the allegation of physical weakness may well be true of the urban, educated Babu, the lower classes of Bengalis are employed under zamindars as lathiyals while some others become terrorising dacoits. In conclusion the article asked: 'if Bengali low class men can be employed for such purposes why cannot they be brought up for the better purpose of being soldiers?'<sup>85</sup> While 'low class' men were thus perceived as already possessing the necessary prerequisites for a military career, another article in the same paper argued, that the weak Babu required preparation before he could 'shoulder the musket' for 'the possessing of strong, robust, healthy constitutions makes *men and heroes*'.<sup>86</sup>

This obsessive preoccupation with manliness and heroism from the 1860s onwards was not merely an attempt to defy the contentious classification of the Bengali as weak and effeminate. While the lack of employment in the army was seen as a denial of opportunity to the Bengali population, there was an increasing sense of

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<sup>85</sup>'Cannot the Bengalees be a Military Nation?', National Paper, 22 May 1867, p. 244.

<sup>86</sup>'Courage and Exercise', National Paper, 12 June 1867, p. 281. Emphasis in original.



frustration at the absence of rewards for loyalty. In 1858 Sambad Prabhakar, edited by the influential poet Ishvarchandra Gupta, editorialised on the 'shameful' Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in these terms:

The Sepoy Mutiny has disgraced the name of Bharat. In this essay, we are entreating the mutineers not to blemish the pure land of Bharat any further and to surrender immediately to the State. It is because of them that Bharat has lost her former glory and famine has befallen the land. Therefore, there is no other way except to ask for pardon of the world-conquering British.<sup>87</sup>

The same paper reported on the bhadralok gathering at the Hindu Metropolitan College in May 1857, to condemn the Mutiny and to express loyalty to the British Government.<sup>88</sup> But with the reorganisation of the army following the Mutiny and later with the application of the martial races theory to recruitment, the Bengali newspapers expressed their resentment at what was seen as distrust on the part of the government. The Bharat Mihir, a weekly from Mymensingh, lamented in 1876: 'what have we done to warrant such distrust? Have we not removed from ourselves the stain

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<sup>87</sup>'Editorial', Sambad Prabhakar, April 1858, reprinted in Binay Ghosh, Samayik Patre Banglar Samaj Chitra, Vol I, p. 155.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 153. The gentlemen named here are Raja Radhakanta Deb, Raja Kamal Krishna Bahadoor - who later became a member of the General Committee of the Hindu Mela; Rajendra Datta, Harachandra Ghosh, and Kaliprasanna Sinha - who pioneered the writing of colloquial Bengali prose. Illustrating a split self-image, Kaliprasanna Sinha burlesqued this meeting in the persona of 'Hutom': 'Sniffing danger, the Bengali Babus organised a meeting ... to convince the Saheb that "Although a hundred years have passed, they are still ... [the] ill-fated chicken-hearted Bengalis - even after years of hobnobbing with the British and imbibing British education ... they have failed to become like the Americans. ... Many of their bigwigs are so scared of storms that they do not take a boat ride on the Ganges, if they have to urinate at night they have to be accompanied by their wives or their servants and maids to the toilet ... they are frightened even of their own shadows - that these people will fight is absolutely impossible.' Kaliprasanna Sinha, Hutom Pyanchar Naksha, ('Sketches by the "Barn Owl"', 1862), Arun Nag (ed.), Satika Hutom Pyanchar Naksha, Calcutta, 1991; p. 133.

of the Sepoy Revolt with the heart's blood of hundreds of native heroes?'<sup>89</sup>

From the 1860s the Bengali middle-class intelligentsia was making attempts to recall stray incidents of heroism displayed during the Mutiny. Rajnarayan Basu's recollection of the 'fighting Moonsiff' in his 'Prospectus for a Society for the Promotion of National Feeling among the Educated Natives of Bengal' which appeared in the National Paper in 1866, fused the theme of loyalty with the demand for physical education. Apart from the need for gymnasiums, which as we shall see, the Hindu Mela partly fulfilled, Rajnarayan also stressed a new pedagogy for the Bengali:

The Society will also publish tracts in Bengalee, giving, by instances quoted from the ancient history of the country, proofs of the military prowess of the ancient Bengalees, and mentioning isolated instances of the existence of such prowess in modern Bengalees also, such as the celebrated "fighting Moonsiff" who figured in the late Sepoy Rebellion on behalf of the English.<sup>90</sup>

The 'fighting moonsiff' of Rajnarayan's speech was Babu Pearymohun Banerjee of Uttarpara, who at the time was Moonsiff of Allahabad. In the context of nineteenth-century Bengal it is not surprising that the dichotomy between intellect and physical strength should be located at the heart of reports about this incident. Referring to the Calcutta Review's accolade for Pearymohun's display of 'a capacity for rule and a fertility of resource', The Friend of India retorted:

We are not slow to scold Bengalees when required, but if in India there is a race to whom God has given capacity, real clearness of brain, it is the Bengalee. Take the most timid quaking wretch of a Kayast you can find, put him in any district in India with a shadow of authority, and if he does not

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<sup>89</sup>Bharat Mihir, in RNP, No. 20 of 1876, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup>Rajnarayan Basu, 'Prospectus', p. 92.

make Pujabee and Sikh and Marhatta and Hindostanee, work themselves to death for his benefit, and think all the while it is for their own, he is no true Bengalee.<sup>91</sup>

The 'fighting moonsiff', the anonymous tract informs us was not only promoted to Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector in Banda, but was also given some jagheer land.<sup>92</sup> Despite the contempt expressed by the Friend of India, the theme of loyalty merged here with the defiance against the stereotype of the weak but intelligent Bengali. This theme was to remain an important one even two decades after the Mutiny. In 1907 the courage of the 'fighting moonsiff' would enter the discussion about identity and diet in the historical journal Aitihasik Chitra.<sup>93</sup>

The theme of loyalty returned in another report in the Hindu Ranjika in 1877, together with the spectre of the Mutiny, once again reinforced with the theme of physical weakness:

The government makes a great mistake in not allowing the natives of Bengal to be employed as soldiers or officers. Their applications to enter the military service are rejected on the score of their physical weakness and because they were not regarded as loyal.<sup>94</sup>

The lack of gain from the obvious display of loyalty during a major crisis in the past, directed much of the discourse on physical education. The Hindu Mela, not only instituted a Physical Education Section within its organising committee, but also allocated space for displaying various forms of physical exercise and tournaments.

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<sup>91</sup>Quoted in The Mutinies and the People, p. 141.

<sup>92</sup>The Mutinies and the People, p. 141, 193.

<sup>93</sup>Ashvini Kumar Sen, 'Sipahi Yuddhe Bhento Bangali', ('The Rice-eating Bengali in the Sepoy Mutiny'), Aitihasik Chitra, August-September 1907, pp. 211-14.

<sup>94</sup>Hindu Ranjika, in RNP, No. 23 of 1877, p. 5.

An overarching theme that ran through all the segments of activities of the Hindu Mela, was the loss of physical courage, a quality Bengalis had possessed in the past. In order to inspire and inform, Nabagopal's National Paper carried historical sketches of gymnasiums in ancient Greece and Rome and in Germany and France.<sup>95</sup> Frequently the National Paper occupied itself with the question of courage and heroism and under what circumstances they came to the fore. One such article assigned the lack of a robust physique in Bengalis to their lack of courage, for 'the physical is the father of the moral man'.<sup>96</sup> The missing 'military element' was a prerequisite for validating any claim to nationhood:

He is not a true Bengalee, who cannot trace his descent to an old and ancient Hindoo family or ascribe his ancestor's spiritual illumination to a muni or rishi of antiquity. But nevertheless the Bengalees as they now are most backward in appearing in a battle field. This should not be. If we wish to be a nation. If we wish to live in terms of equality and friendship with Europeans. If we wish to be one with Rajpoots, Sikhs and Maharathas.<sup>97</sup>

As we shall see in Chapter II, the heroic feats of the Rajputs, Marathas and Sikhs were assimilated into a widening Hindu identity in late nineteenth-century Bengal, but a parallel trend placed Bengalis as a 'race' in a combative relation with the martial races. This later found a resolution of sorts in the attempts made by Sarala Debi Chaudhurani to rediscover Bengali heroes in the early years of the next century, as we shall see in Chapter V. Nabagopal's gymnasium attracted various supporters and the nineteenth-century actor and playwright, Amritlal Basu records that he was

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<sup>95</sup>National Paper, 26 August 1868, pp. 426-7.

<sup>96</sup>'Courage Dependent upon Physical Structure', National Paper, 2 September 1868, p. 439.

<sup>97</sup>'The Military Element', National Paper, 1 July 1868, p. 325.

an active participant and learned gymnastics under the tutelage of a Eurasian, Peter, who was paid a salary of Rs. 40 per month.<sup>98</sup>

Within the Hindu Mela itself, a branch specially devoted to physical culture was also instituted. Like all other sections that made up this gathering, this too was designed to emphasise indigenous methods of cultivating physical strength.<sup>99</sup> An anonymous poem posted on different sections of the exhibition area during the second Hindu Mela in 1868, while admitting the intelligence of the Bengalis, said that there was room for improvement especially in the sciences and crafts. Moreover, since: 'We weak Bengalis are despised by all, / How shall we avenge ourselves?'<sup>100</sup>

The published programme of the 1868 Hindu Mela, reported that there was a demonstration of indigenous wrestling, emphasising that the techniques displayed were 'a creation of Indians, and for this we are not indebted to anyone'.<sup>101</sup> This display was followed by lathi-khela or fights with bamboo-staves and pole-vault. Of all the items, according to this report what astounded the audience, especially the Europeans was the exercise that involved the spinning of a husking-pedal from one shoulder to another. At the end of this conspicuous presentation of indigenous techniques of physical training, a group of youth exhibited European physical exercises concluding it with a poem about the need for exercise and physical activity amongst Bengalis in

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<sup>98</sup>Arun Kumar Mitra (ed.), Amritalal Basur Smriti O Atmasmriti, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 43, 112.

<sup>99</sup>Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran', p.150.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

order to restore strength, promote well-being and increase happiness.<sup>102</sup>

Throughout the history of the Mela, the need for physical exercise and body-building was stressed again and again denoting the crisis facing Bengalis in the forging of an identity appropriate to the times - viz., active, physically capable, competent and manly. This remained an important trend and often expressed itself in the defensive attitudes towards the rice-based Bengali diet. Manomohan Basu, in his keynote address to the second Hindu Mela, said that if the sixth section, i.e., the Physical Education Section endeavoured to initiate physical education within the country - they would simultaneously rid the Bengali of the humiliating reputation he had amongst other Indian communities of being 'fainthearted' and 'rice-eating'.<sup>103</sup> The Bengali word 'Bhento', literally 'rice-eater', connoted 'weak' as well as 'clumsy'.

The equation of timidity with inappropriate diet drew not only from a negative comparison with the martial Punjabi, whose diet was wheat-based, but also from contemporary Western ideas about what constituted a balanced diet.<sup>104</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterji's Banga Darshan article entitled 'Bangalir Bahubal' or 'The Physical Strength of the Bengalis' (1874), is of particular importance in this context as it aids our understanding of the anxiety about diet and physical strength. Bankim in this essay, refers to several contemporary explanations regarding the lack of physical

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>104</sup>David Arnold has examined the attitude to diet in colonial India which changed from its earlier connotations as a social and cultural marker to association with physique and its later correlation with agriculture and industry. David Arnold, 'Discovery of Diet in Colonial India', Seminar paper presented at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, October 1992.

strength amongst Bengalis. Among these, he discussed the physical environment which on account possessing fertile soil makes the Bengali less hard-working. Heat and humidity also make him indolent. The third cause is attributed to the fact that Bengal is a rice-producing state and rice forms the main diet of Bengalis. Rice does not have adequate nutrients to build the body and hence Bengalis are weak. Bankim attributes this to the lack of gluten in the diet of the Bengalis. Using Johnston's Chemistry of Common Life, Vol I as his source,<sup>105</sup> Bankim informed his readers that the gluten content is higher in meat and wheat, 'for this reason, the physique of meat-eaters and those who consume wheat, is very strong - and that of rice-eating races weak!'<sup>106</sup> The radical difference between the weak Bengali and the strong Punjabi was based on a bad diet.

This relationship of conflict persisted until the end of the nineteenth-century, particularly in distinguishable acts of courage. The Sambad Prabhakar, reporting on the Hindu Mela held in 1878, discusses at some length the wrestling match between a Bengali and a Punjabi wrestler:

Even though the Bengali tried very hard to win, he finally failed, but this is

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<sup>105</sup>James Johnston (1796-1855) had sought to give contemporary scientific discoveries a practical application to agriculture and manufactures. In this particular work, his last, he said, 'In rice countries it has often been noticed, that the natives devour what to us appears enormous quantities of the grain and this circumstance is ascribed to the small proportion it contains of the highly nutritive and necessary gluten.' J.F.W. Johnston, The Chemistry of Common Life, Vol I, Part III, Edinburgh, 1853, p. 103.

<sup>106</sup>Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, 'Bangalir Bahubal', Banga Darshan, 1874, III: 4, p. 145-153, in Jogesh Chandra Bagal, Bankim Rachanabali, Vol II, (1954 rpt., Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1969), p. 211. Bankim adds in his Banga Darshan piece that Irish soldiers are strong despite the high gluten content in their potato-based diet. This has for some reason been edited out of Bagal's edition.

not a matter of shame. Last year, the Bengali had defeated the Punjabi, this year he has lost ... Let us so endeavour that next year the Punjabi shall lose again. History now distinguishes the Bengali and the Punjabi in terms of the jackal and the lion - in this context, the fact that the Bengali has succeeded in wrestling with a Punjabi - this in itself is worthy of praise.<sup>107</sup>

The emotions which underlay this colonially constructed comparison between a martial race and a non-martial one, are evident from this report. Rice, as Paul Greenough has demonstrated in a different context, is also an important cultural construct symbolising prosperity.<sup>108</sup> In the present context, Nabagopal Mitra's very emotional defence of rice reveals the way in which the principal crop produced in Bengal, by the late nineteenth century, through numerous interactions with western ideas and colonial notions, had become a metonym for the Bengali himself.<sup>109</sup>

In a related formulation, Rajnarayan Basu saw diet itself as an expression of cultural identity. In his 'Prospectus' which had inspired the Mela, 'with regard to diet, ...Those educated natives who adopted an exclusively European mode of living were obliged by ill health in the course of a few years to resume the native or modify the former'.<sup>110</sup> While the influential Tattvabodhini Patrika, lamented in 1876, that

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<sup>107</sup>'Hindu Mela', Sambad Prabhakar, January-February 1878, in Binay Ghosh, Samayik Patre Sekaler Katha, Vol I, p. 260.

<sup>108</sup>Paul R. Greenough, Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944, New York, 1982, pp. 12-41.

<sup>109</sup>Satyendranath Tagore recalls that in the course of a public discussion when the attention turned to diet and he mentioned that chapatis made of maize or wheat were more nutritious and made a race strong when compared to rice. This drew a heated response from Nabagopal Mitra who declared that he was prepared to eat rice three times a day whatever the reasons against eating rice! See Satyendranath Tagore, Amar Balyakatha O Amar Bombai Prabas, Calcutta, 1915, p. 40.

<sup>110</sup> Rajnarayan Basu, 'Prospectus', rpt. Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, p. 99.



Indians who prefer the European diet are grossly mistaken because 'there are sufficient nutrients and energising ingredients in our food'.<sup>111</sup> The unprecedented importance granted to diet had several sources. The theory of the martial races and questions about what created a robust race were entangled with the concerns for health and fitness - an obsession which expressed itself in the numerous contemporary texts on health and fitness.<sup>112</sup> But more significantly, these attempts to identify diet as a component of cultural identity was an attempt to reverse the excesses of the Young Bengal in the 1820s and 1830s. The excesses of Derozio's group of young students had diet as a specific item on their agenda to ridicule and condemn Hindu orthodoxy.<sup>113</sup> Rajnarayan in his 'Prospectus' was after all addressing a later group of English-educated Bengalis, hence the urgent need for differentiating between the demeanour of those with 'National feeling' and the excess-ridden Young Bengal.<sup>114</sup>

The Hindu Mela, which was directly inspired by Rajnarayan's 'Prospectus', during its

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<sup>111</sup>'Svadeshanurag', Tattvabodhini Patrika, 1876, rpt. Binay Ghosh, Samayik Patre Banglar Samaj Chitra, Calcutta, Vol I, pp. 266-7.

<sup>112</sup>Both rice and physical exercise were major topics in contemporary Bengali texts on health and care of the body. For example, Jadu Nath Mukhopadhyay, Sarir Palan, ('The Care of the Body'), Chinsurah, 1868, Radhika Prasanna Mukhopadhyay, Svasthya Raksha, ('Health Care'), Calcutta, 1868, Bharatchandra Bandyopadhyay, Svasthyakaumudi: Arthat Sarbasadharaner Abashya-Gyatabya Svasthya Bishayak Nutanbidha Grantha, ('A Manual of Health: The New Essential Health Guide for the Common Man'), Dacca, 1872. Of these, the first went into seven editions by 1876.

<sup>113</sup> See Sumit Sarkar, 'The Complexities of Young Bengal', Nineteenth Century Studies, 4, 1973, pp. 504-34.

<sup>114</sup>Rajnarayan noted with some irony: 'The writer of this article regrets the prevalence of Anglo-Mania in his time which has obliged him to initiate a movement in favour of his mother-tongue by addressing his educated countrymen in English.' 'Prospectus', Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, p. 97.

fourteen years of existence, remained an inspiration of patriotic literature and we shall briefly analyse some aspects of the literature it produced. As we have demonstrated, the conflictual nature of the Indian/Bengali/Hindu nationalist identity, mystifies relations between the discrete segments of the nationalist identity. For this reason a dialogical engagement with the material reveal the ways in which the nationalist imagination perceived and portrayed its history.

### **The Imagery of Patriotism and the Nationalist Identity**

One of the key points of emphasis in the organisation of the Hindu Mela was self-reliance. This expressed itself not only in the economic aspects of the Mela, but also in the literature it produced. Ganendranath Tagore, who was the President of the 1869 Mela Committee, acknowledged the shame that ensued from the knowledge that 'we implore our rulers for help in everything we do'.<sup>115</sup> The Mela displayed potentialities that could be segregated from what was perceived to be the reductiveness of the colonially defined subject. The process of segregation and separation granted this discourse the strength to construct and recreate an identity - that could become an interesting subject of knowledge and critical enquiry. The literature produced by the Mela was an attempt to explore particular facets of this identity.

Charles H. Heimsath has pointed out in his Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform that in circumstances where nationalists 'sought to build their

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<sup>115</sup>Gonendranath Tagore, 'Chaitra Melar Uddeshya' or 'The Purpose of the Chaitra Mela' in Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran', p. 110.

movement on social realities and root their ideas of the nation in the soil of living myths and symbols, the sentiments thereby announced turned out to be meaningful only to those who shared common religious, linguistic, or geographical identifications.<sup>116</sup> In Heimsath's assessment, the reason for the failure of the Hindu Mela was that it 'never developed ties with other provinces and, by definition, sponsored national sentiments only among Hindus.'<sup>117</sup> Yet, despite its ultimate failure as an organisation, the Mela survived for fourteen years and inspired patriotic literature deploying powerful imagery which guided nationalism in its more confrontational phase. We shall now consider what constituted these images.

Satyendranath Tagore recalls in his memoirs that the Hindu Mela inspired his patriotic song 'Bharat-sangit'.<sup>118</sup> In this song Satyendranath thematically united an Indian identity by fusing Aryan/Hindu and Rajput themes. Moreover, India was a land of the brave now cast in darkness because of its subordination by the British.

Three poems were composed for and recited at the Hindu Mela of 1868. The poet, Akshyay Chandra Chaudhuri wrote a poem that captured for his audience India's glorious past. Categorising his contemporary countrymen as 'useless clods' who are cowards and embodiments of timidity, he asks:

Do you recall the four sons of Dasharath?  
Do you recall Kurukshetra?  
And the women who were brave like the lioness -  
Women like the Queen Durgabati?  
They sacrificed their lives their country

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<sup>116</sup>Heimsath, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform, p. 134.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid., p.137.

<sup>118</sup>Tagore, Amar Balyakatha, p. 15.

Holding the sword in their womanly hands.<sup>119</sup>

The genealogy of the Aryan people that unfolds here and elsewhere trace their origins in the heroes of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and links them to the heroic Rajputs of medieval Indian history. In claiming this genealogy for themselves, the nineteenth-century Bengali articulators of the Hindu discourse were attempting to 'invent' a past that would seem viable in the face of the colonial attempts to demean their collective identity.

Shibnath Sharma (later Shastri), afterwards a Brahmo leader, also composed a poem similar in tone the same year. This poem deflected the negative image of the weak Bengali replacing it with alternative images of heroic and capable male figures - the Pala kings of Bengal, who had reinstated the Glorious Mother, and the resistance of Pratapaditya to Muslim harassment.<sup>120</sup> The poem ended with a call to all Bengalis to arise and awake and wipe the tears of their Motherland. This tendency to search out a past articulated itself in numerous ways but is given the most persuasive and powerful expression in the historical texts written in this period, which we shall consider in Chapter II.

As we have seen in the Akshyay Chandra Chaudhuri's poem, the depiction of women as heroic figures is a characteristic feature of this discourse. The absence of heroism in contemporary Bengali life was elaborated mainly by male writers and expressed itself in plays and satirical poems, which were sometimes occasioned by the

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<sup>119</sup>Akshyay Chandra Chaudhuri, in Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran,' p. 116.

<sup>120</sup>Shib Nath Sharman, 'Aha Ki Apurba Shobha...' ( 'Oh What a Grand Sight'), Ibid., p. 129.

Hindu Mela. It was this concept of the infirm and easily assailable Bengali that informed constructions of heroic figures of the past. Jyotirindranath Tagore's poem composed for the 1868 Mela bore the epigraph: 'Janani Janmabhumi, Svarger Gariyasi' ('The Motherland is more glorious than Heaven'). Jyotirindranath depicts the Bharat Mata as a figure who has lost her former glory and is an imprisoned victim-figure.<sup>121</sup> This together with nationalist plays like Bharat Mata which was enacted at the 1873 Hindu Mela, helped epitomise the inspiring image of the Motherland that directed the later literature of nationalism.

If heroism and women's contribution to it informed discursive constructs of the self, the actual space granted to women within the Mela was circumscribed by real rather than discursive norms. Women displayed their needle-work and other handicrafts. This was perceived by the male organisers as an undesirable emulation of the West. Manomohan Basu in his address to the 1869 Mela commenting on the displays put up by the Exhibition Section of the Mela, expressed disappointment that the women had mainly exhibited their needle-work and handicrafts in which they followed Europeans. The items they had created were, he said, of no use and served no purpose. Women should retain their traditional culinary arts and concentrate on the preparing the various traditional sweets which are prepared for Bengali festivals.<sup>122</sup>

As Tanika Sarkar has pointed out, in the nineteenth-century Bengali context, 'the

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<sup>121</sup>Jyotirindranath's poem says, 'Look at the state of your mother now!/Sickly and withered, a body of skin and bones,/The mighty demons of subjection and ignorance/Suck her blood and wound her soul,' Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>122</sup>See Manomohan Basu, 'Hindu Melar Uddeshya Bishayak Baktrita' or 'A Speech on the Purpose of the Hindu Mela', Ibid., p. 225.

discourse on Hindu marriage and womanhood was located at the heart of early Bengali nationalism.<sup>123</sup> Manomohan's mortification at the imitative 'Western' arts presented by women is an indicator of the double-bind which codified the 'women's question' in nineteenth century Bengal. While needlework was seen as an essential part of the curriculum in girls' schools much in keeping with Victorian norms of women's education,<sup>124</sup> to the nationalist organisers of the Mela this seemed to imply a undesirable affiliation with foreigners. Therefore a stress on indigenous arts was all the more important when dealing with the womenfolk who during this period became the distinguishing and abiding bearers of culture and tradition. Ten years later, in 1879, the Hindu Mela had its first woman speaker in Pandita Ramabai who lectured on the necessity of learning Indian languages, the need for religious instruction for Hindu girls and the freedom of the ancient Aryan women. Although the text of the speech was not quoted, the Sambad Prabhakar mentioned in their reportage of the 1879 Hindu Mela, the themes which she touched upon.<sup>125</sup> Later in chapter III, we shall turn to the ways in which the evolving Hindu discourse envisioned women, both in terms of prescriptive norms and heroic ideals.

Just as women were perceived as responsible for preserving culture, elaborations of what constituted 'national', i.e., Hindu culture informed every aspect

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<sup>123</sup>Tanika Sarkar, 'Hindu Conjuality and Nationalism in late Nineteenth Century Bengal', Indian Women : Myth and Reality, National Seminar Papers 1989, Calcutta, 1990, Paper No. 9, p. 2.

<sup>124</sup>At the Beaulah Chandranath Female Normal School for example, fancy and plain sewing as well as knitting woollen comforters, caps and socks, were a part of the curriculum. See Education Proceedings: Bengal, September 1872, p. 86.

<sup>125</sup>See 'Hindu Mela', Sambad Prabhakar, 21 February 1879, p. 2, Column 3.

of the Mela. The prize-winning essays for the third Hindu Mela of 1869 were about the 'Meaning and Inner Moral of the Ramayana' by Rajanikanta Gupta, whose contributions to history we shall discuss later; and a similar essay on the Mahabharata by Janakinath Datta.<sup>126</sup> Quite often the National Paper announced the themes of the essays that would be rewarded. In 1870, amongst other themes, the Mela Committee announced a prize of fifty rupees for the 'best discourse on Bhishma Deva and the lesson suggested by his life in our modern days'.<sup>127</sup> It is significant that the story of the prince who became the great sacrificing Bhisma on account of his abdication in the Mahabharata should be perceived as conveying a meaning beyond its mythicity to present-day Bengalis. Sacrifice, as we shall see constituted an important dimension of the alternative masculinity. Most of the themes thus drew upon a repertoire which could be closely examined, and interpreted. This interpretation, the Mela Committee expected would be an 'Indian' interpretation, thus affirming that only those to whom a text belonged had the exclusive right to create and recreate it. Raja Shourindramohan Tagore announced the same year a prize of fifty rupees for the best essay on Joydeb,<sup>128</sup> and it was awarded to the young historian, Rajanikanta Gupta.<sup>129</sup>

As we have observed, both among the organisers and the participants there were hardly any Muslim names. However, in an interesting and characteristic act of

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<sup>126</sup>Mukhopadhyay, 'Hindu Melar Bibaran', pp. 230-7.

<sup>127</sup>'Local', National Paper, 5 January 1870, p. 9.

<sup>128</sup>Advertisement, National Paper, 2 February 1870, p. 57.

<sup>129</sup>Sengupta, Samsad Bangali Charitabhidhan, pp. 441-2.

incorporation, Maulabaksh Khan, a musician from Baroda, was awarded a gold medal. Without commenting on his Muslim identity, the Sulabh Samachar, reported his great reverence for Hindu music, for music (it said) is basically a Hindu art.<sup>130</sup> Such acts of incorporation, as we shall see, remained a mode of dealing with other cultures which the Hindu discourse had ostracised.

If the Hindu Mela unwittingly elaborated and systematised a power which could subordinate other social groups, it was also an agent in the emergence of a new and powerful opposition to colonial power. Rabindranath Tagore, who was fourteen years old at the ninth Hindu Mela, in 1875, composed a poem entitled 'Hindumelay Upahar' ('A Gift at the Hindu Mela'). The poem was printed and distributed to the audience.<sup>131</sup> In this poem, the young Tagore constructed the twin images of the heroic Aryans and Rajputs - Prithviraj, Durgabati and Yudhishtira and envisioned a grim future for the land. Tagore's second poem occasioned by the Hindu Mela was composed two years later at the eleventh Hindu Mela in 1877. Criticising the Imperial Assembly held by Lord Lytton that year, Tagore's poem is extremely critical about excessive government expenditure on the Imperial Assembly when a famine was destroying lives. Tagore's poem rhetorically inquires:

In this deep darkness, in this unfortunate times, India quivers with joyous sounds!  
I hear that millions of slaves, wiping their tears and  
suppressing their sighs,  
Are delirious with joy for the golden chains.

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<sup>130</sup>Sulabh Samachar, February 1875, in Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, p. 41.

<sup>131</sup>Pal, Rabi Jibani, Vol I, p. 236.



I ask you, O Himalaya, can this portend a happy day?<sup>132</sup>

While the young Tagore's poem illustrates the oppositional nationalist identity that was being nurtured by the Hindu Mela, it also negotiates its power by deploying the Orientalist equation of the land of Bharat with the ancient Aryavarta - the land of the Aryans of Arjuna and Yudhisthira. Drawing upon the current view of a fall that came in wake of Muslim invasion, Tagore mocks Indians who had failed to unite when Mohammad Ghorī had attacked, who have now awakened to worship the very symbol of their slavery.<sup>133</sup> Thus once again, the equation of the two groups of Bijatiya - the foreigners - the Muslim and the British is affirmed.

## Conclusion

The Hindu Mela, and similar agendas for cultural regeneration presents some dimensions of what constituted a Hindu discourse in nineteenth- century Bengal. This discourse in turn aided the construction of an emerging nationalist identity. The creation of this identity involved the drawing from an available Hindu repertoire some defining metaphors, which were then subjected to a rationalistic scrutiny. Hindu identity thus constructed could then be deployed to refute the official and missionary

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<sup>132</sup>Rabindranath Tagore, 'Dillir Darbar', quoted in Bagal, Hindu Melar Itibritta, p. 123. The poem was incorporated into Act IV:4 of Jyotirindranath Tagore's play Svapnamayi (1882) - the word 'British' substituted with 'Moghul'. See Jyotirindranath Tagore, Jyotinrindranather Natyasangraha, ('The Complete Plays of Jyotirindranath'), Calcutta, 1969, pp. 521-23, also Pal, Rabi-Jibani, Vol I, p. 300.

<sup>133</sup>Incidentally, although Debendranath Tagore probably did not attend the Durbar, he had received a Certificate of Honour on the occasion. See Pal, Rabi-Jibani, Vol I, pp. 317-9.

critique of Hindu society and religion. The homogenisation of a Hindu tradition and the institution of a middle class who could claim to be its sole spokesmen, helped to forge a shield for it against alien criticisms, misinterpretations and misrepresentations and empowered its chief articulators.

However, the framing of an identity along such religio-cultural lines necessarily meant alienating the Muslim population of Bengal. This process again was inherent in the nineteenth-century redefinition of Hinduism itself which in its claims to be universal included the Muslim by erasing its difference and emphasising an 'invented' Hindu component within Islam. The crisis in Bengali identity, prompted by the intersection, difference and interactions between Orientalist discourse on Aryanism, official denigration of the Babu, and Missionary denigration of 'native' tradition, framed a specific kind of Hindu identity producing, among other things, troubling consequences for the way questions of Hindu identity were to be posed subsequently in Indian politics.

The struggle for assertion and empowerment which this discourse enunciated was a project of the Western-educated Bengali middle class. All these elements defined the nature of the emerging Hindu discourse, which, far from being a mass of disembodied ideas, emanated out of a complex process of interaction. Its sources were numerous - discursive and organisational, indigenous and Orientalist. Furthermore, the process by which this discourse disseminated its identity entailed resistance to the dominant discourse of colonialism.

While this homogenised Hindu identity operated as a form of hegemonic control a set of ideas about leadership and courage were elaborated by other social and

discursive means. These were clarified and elucidated in the contemporary project of history-writing. In the next chapter we shall examine how the evolving Hindu discourse conferred on itself this significant facet of its identity - a sense of its own history.

**CHAPTER II**  
**IN SEARCH OF PAST GLORY :**  
**HINDU IDENTITY AND THE HISTORICAL SENSE**

Writing in 1874, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay articulated a problem that was perceived as a characteristic feature of the Bengali race:

In many instances pride is useful to man ... National pride lies at the root of the creation of indigenous history and the betterment of people; history is the basis of social science and social betterment. The misery of a people without history is endless. There are a few unfortunate wretches that do not know even the names of their great-grandfather; and there are a few wretched races that know not the glorious deeds of their ancestors. Of those disgraceful races the Bengalis are most prominent.<sup>1</sup>

Bankim's statement highlighted several key-issues: that the quality of pride could be useful, that its usefulness is tied up with the pre-eminent question of social betterment and finally that the finer attributes of pride would result in a respect for history. Bankim's equation of national pride and history was a fairly common construction in the 1870s. The pursuit of the historical was interlocked in the power/knowledge struggle between what constituted 'History' in the Western, scientific sense and what indigenous attempts at self-discovery and ensuing self-definitions were identifying as their own history. The complex interlocking of power and knowledge within the contentious field of contemporary historiography entailed a multi-layered confrontation. On the one hand, it was the power of an articulate, hegemonic class which attempted to construct a self-description where the past was invoked in an

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<sup>1</sup>Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, 'Bangalar Itihas', ('The History of Bengal'), Bangadarsan, 1874, rpt, Jogesh Chandra Bagal (ed.), Bankim Rachanabali, Vol II, Calcutta, 1969, p. 330.

attempt to establish its self-image as leaders, while on the other hand the historical sense was deployed to challenge the power of the dominant colonial discourse. History-writing expressed significant features of the nineteenth-century Bengali/Hindu cultural identity and we shall study some of its defining features here.

In the context of Indian historiography, earlier scholarship had begun by cataloguing the various historical works which it designated as indigenous attempts at writing history.<sup>2</sup> However, even when the basic approach was conventional, such scholarship concerned itself with a question that has currently become very important for scholars looking at indigenous attempts at history-writing. This question concerns itself with the practice of history-writing and whether it was an exclusively European practice. Bijit Kumar Datta, in his study of historical novels in Bengali literature, claimed that history-writing was essentially a European practice and did not previously exist in India. Pursuing an essentialising Orientalist perspective he attributed the absence of history to the excessive importance given to religion and spirituality within Indian culture, which he inferred were at odds with the development of a true historical temperament.<sup>3</sup> While Datta articulated a conventional and Eurocentric understanding of history, current scholarly debates concerned with the nature of historical knowledge and its articulators have pointed to the collusion between imperial agenda and colonial historiography. According to Ranajit Guha, the

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<sup>2</sup>See A.R. Mallick, 'Modern Historical Writings in Bengali', in C.H. Philips ed., Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, London, 1961, pp. 446-460. Also N.N. Bhattacharya, 'Historical works in Bengali', in J.P. De Souza & C.M. Kulkarni eds., Historiography in Indian Languages, Delhi, 1972, pp. 157-64.

<sup>3</sup>See Bijit Kumar Datta, Bangla Sahitye Aitihasik Upanyas, Calcutta, 1981.

beginnings of colonialist historiography were 'the consequence of the Company's urge to inform itself about the character and value of landed property, so that it could reduce its dependence on wily native intermediaries and use the office of Diwan to maximise and systematise the collection of revenue'.<sup>4</sup> As this was operated on by a controlling power mechanism in nineteenth-century Bengal, to 'assert the autonomy of Indian historiography amounted, therefore, to challenging ... Britain's right to rule India'.<sup>5</sup> Guha tells us that the challenge articulated by Bankim in terms of physical prowess, or bahubal, was projected through a series of displacements into the 'remote rather than the recent colonial past' and made the Muslim rather than the British its object.<sup>6</sup>

While Guha explores the agenda for an 'autonomous' history of India as it was articulated in the nineteenth century, our concern here will be to look at the preoccupation with history as an attempt at drafting a suitable self-image. Locating history as a site for expressing a hegemonically formulated self-image, as we shall see, makes it possible to scrutinise the manner in which the antithetical qualities of loyalty and physical courage were crystallised by this discourse into a desirable self-image.

Debates about what constitutes autonomy in this respect, have been given a wider scope by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has challenged the possibility of the autonomous existence of history within a non-Western context, for 'so long as one

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<sup>4</sup>Ranajit Guha, An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and Its Implications, Calcutta, 1988, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

operates within the discourse of "history" produced at the institutional site of the university, it is not possible simply to walk out of the deep collusion between "history" and the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation state'.<sup>7</sup> In the context of nineteenth-century, however, indigenous history was not produced from the institutional site of the university. The authors of this oppositional history sought to contest Western assumptions which saw indigenous history-writing as an implausible project. In interrogating the official and missionary denial of a Indian past that could be rationalised, Western ideas were appropriated and often given a certain indigenous slant.

The project of history-writing evolved through a series of interactions with indigenous and colonial norms. In order to counter the colonial hegemonic category of the martial race, nineteenth century Bengali historiography appropriated Rajput and Maratha heroic legends. Heroism thus constructed combined martial qualities with dharma and often linked military prowess with an indigenous notion of honour. It was this interaction that aided in the reconstruction of the contemporary Hindu identity with all its contradictions.

Sudipta Kaviraj, in his series of papers on Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, has explored the problem of the nineteenth-century historical sense in greater detail. Kaviraj sees him as often attempting a rationalistic historical explanation as also

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<sup>7</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', Representations 37, 1992, p. 19.

attempting to write what he designates 'imaginary history'.<sup>8</sup> Generalising about history-making in colonial Bengal, Kaviraj sees history as a pedagogic process, a process by which a community could educate itself about how it should represent itself, because a 'people can gradually become what they believe they are'.<sup>9</sup> The community in this case, Kaviraj says, is the Bengali middle-class creating itself as occupants of an 'imagined' <sup>10</sup> entity called Bharat - an integrated and unified whole, that existed prior to the writing of its history. 'The Bengalis gradually appropriate this "glorious" history with great eagerness and begin to see imaginatively of course, this history of a distant, unrelated people (the Marathas and Rajputs mainly) as a "prehistory" of themselves'.<sup>11</sup> The envisioning of this heroic genealogy was according to Kaviraj an attempt by Bengalis to 'see themselves as part of a larger whole ... At the same time, this implies a faint, uncharacteristic, admission of inadequacy, of being unable to cope with British colonialism singlehandedly.'<sup>12</sup> While one would generally agree with Kaviraj about the aims and objectives of the nineteenth-century historical

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<sup>8</sup>Of the numerous papers of Sudipta Kaviraj specially important in this context are: 'The Myth of Praxis: The Construction of the Figure of Krishna in Krishnacarita', (1987), 'Imaginary History', (1988), 'Humour and the Prison of Reality: Kamalakanta as the Secret Autobiography of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay', (1988). All three are Occasional Papers on History and Society, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

<sup>9</sup>Kaviraj, Imaginary History, p. 100.

<sup>10</sup>Kaviraj draws on Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism, (London, 1983), where Anderson evaluates nationalism as an artifact which is constructed within a historically determined vernacular matrix. Imaginary history aids in the construction of this imagined community that envisages a common nationality.

<sup>11</sup>Kaviraj, Imaginary History, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 107.



project, we need to look more closely at the parameters of the historical imagination and the multiple forces that shaped its evolution. While Bankim's contribution to the reconstruction of the heroic past is significant, his concern for history, or rather its lack in contemporary Bengali society was a common one. This concern for historical principles in indigenous reconstructions of the past expressed itself not only in the abundance of historical fiction and epic poetry, but also in arguments about suitable history text-books for school children and in subsequent efforts to provide history with an institutional sanctuary.

While Kaviraj relates history-making in the colonial Indian context to the ways in which the middle-class organised and expressed its social subjectivity and political and cultural potential, he does not adequately explain why the imagination played such a major integrative role in the shaping of the self-image of this class. Kaviraj's approach concentrates on the process of rationalisation, which important though it was, does not offer an adequate explanation of the parallel mythological structure within attempts at history-writing during this period. Perhaps it is because Kaviraj considers Bankim in isolation that it becomes possible to assert that history-making as an activity was similar to, but quite different from myth-making activities, even if he is ready to acknowledge theoretically that both are means of 'setting up an intelligent relation with the past'.<sup>13</sup> We shall demonstrate how within the context of nineteenth-century indigenous historiography myth and history are fused together. If history formed an important part of the reconstructed Hindu identity, mythology was

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

inevitably inscribed into this project in order to validate and thus empower itself. It is this dimension of the indigenous search for a past with which to endorse the self that reveals the interwoven texture of myth and history in the nineteenth-century project of history-writing.

In a recent Bengali article, 'Itihaser Uttaradhikar', ('The Inheritance of History') Partha Chatterjee, has demonstrated the rupture brought about by colonialism, especially through the agency of Western education, in the writing of history itself. Characterising Mritunjay Vidyalankar's historical Rajabali (1808) as 'pre-colonial' in temperament, Chatterjee sees in Mritunjay's interpretation of historical events as willed by divine agency an attribute that disappears with the coming of age of English education in India. 'Prior to the European historical sense becoming embedded in the mind of the educated Bengali, such was the form of the historical memory.'<sup>14</sup> With the growing familiarisation with European history, political science and sociology, there emerged a new structure of telling the story of the past. While such tales drew much from the Orientalist researches of organisations like the Asiatic Society, Chatterjee contends that they were written according to 'new' principles quite different from Orientalist attempts at writing history. The dichotomy between pre-colonial and colonial historical modes are not as clear-cut as Chatterjee suggests.<sup>15</sup>

At the core of nineteenth-century attempts at history-writing existed a

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<sup>14</sup>Partha Chattopadhyay, 'Itihaser Uttaradhikar', Baromas, April 1991, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup>Chatterjee's position is discussed in greater detail below, p. 107.

constructed Hindu nationalism which was, in fact, a modern, reconstructed tradition evolved through careful rationalisation. Taking a much narrower time-frame here we will look at how contentious the project of history-writing became in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. While we shall take some of Chatterjee's points further, we shall attempt to demonstrate how the project of history-writing itself evolved out of an interactive matrix of ideas and how what Chatterjee designates the 'pre-colonial' was reinscribed into the complex mythological form that was woven into historiography.

As we have seen, important segments of the network of ideas about a Hindu identity that were persistently evolving in nineteenth-century Bengal, emanated from colonial, missionary and Orientalist debates about the nature of Hindu culture. The rewriting of Indian history by Indians themselves in colonial Bengal can be understood as a means of coping with the present in order to give it coherence and shape. More important for our purpose, is the way in which the project of history-writing pivoted around the question of the power/knowledge relationship, where self-descriptions were valorised in opposition to descriptions of Hindu customs and culture depicted by Others. History thus became a means for framing the oppositional identity, with the dominating Western projection functioning as continual referent. Nineteenth-century historical discourse, in Bengal at least, was woven into every form of literary activity. While this has been generally perceived as a widely accepted phenomenon in the context of the emergence of nationalism, the straining to articulate an oppositional history within a framework that comprised ingredients of Western knowledge was itself a paradoxical project. The complex way in which this oppositional history

emerged points towards intricate interactions which are the precondition of knowledge produced in the colonial context.

### **The Place of History, Vulnerability and Resistance**

In nineteenth-century Bengal, the very notion of history gained a significance previously unknown. This was of course tied in with the Enlightenment understanding of history as a positivist science, and positivist ideas had gained substantial currency amongst the educated middle-classes of Calcutta by the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the dividing line between Orientalist appreciation and historians like Mill had become clearly demarcated by this period. In his Preface to the 1858 edition of Mill's History of British India, H.H. Wilson of the Royal Asiatic Society sought to balance Mill's derision of Hindu character which according to him bore 'no resemblance whatever to the original ... [and] almost outrages humanity'.<sup>17</sup> Twenty years later, Sir Monier Monier-Williams similarly expressed his concern about the considerable harm done by Mills' History published sixty years earlier:

the great historian Mill, whose history of India is still a standard work, has done infinite harm by his unjustifiable blackening of the Indian national character ... No wonder that young Englishmen, just imported from the ruling country and fresh from the study of Mill's history, sometimes affect a supercilious air of superiority when first brought into contact with their Indian

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<sup>16</sup>Geraldine Forbes study, although mechanistic gives us a sense of the circulation of positivist ideas. Geraldine Forbes, Positivism in Bengal, Calcutta, 1975.

<sup>17</sup>H.H. Wilson, Preface to James Mill, The History of British India: Vol I, 5th ed., London, 1858, p. xii.

fellow-subjects.<sup>18</sup>

Mill's History of India, used as a text-book for Indian Civil Servants, dwelt at length on the complete lack of understanding of historical notions amongst Hindus. Mill's opening chapter entitled, 'Chronology and the Ancient History of the Hindus', plotted several points along the axis of historical understanding:

Rude nations seem to derive a peculiar gratification from pretensions to a remote antiquity ... It is a suspicious circumstance, in the pretended records of a nation, when we find positive statements for a regular and immense series of years, in the remote abyss of time, but they are entirely deserted by them when we descend to the ages more nearly approaching our own. Where annals are real, they become circumstantial in proportion as they are recent; where fable stands in the place of fact, the times over which memory has any influence are rejected, and the imagination riots in those in which it is unrestrained.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from Mill, later colonial historians also stressed the lack of a historical understanding amongst Indians. 'The act of reading and writing true history and true literature was, in effect, identified with an act of demystification to dislodge those who, under the cover of misty romances and allegories, had installed and perpetuated their rule over the people.'<sup>20</sup> Early missionary historians expressed a similarly hostile attitude to Hinduism.<sup>21</sup> Both official and missionary historiography focussed on the

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<sup>18</sup>Sir Monier Monier-Williams, address to the Indian National Association, 1878, Journal of the National Indian Association, January 1879, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup>James Mill, The History of British India, Vol I, 5th edition, London, 1858, pp. 107-12.

<sup>20</sup>Gauri Vishwanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British rule in India, 1989, London, 1990, p. 111. Here, Vishwanathan refers to Elliot and Dowson's History of India as Told by its Own Historians (1867).

<sup>21</sup>See K.A. Ballhatchet, 'Some Aspects of Historical Writings on India by Protestant Christian Missionaries during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in C.H. Philips ed., Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, pp. 344-53.

superstitions of the Hindus and their lack of understanding of periodisation and other historical concepts.

That the refutation of such disparaging remarks should be seen as the prime objective of indigenous history-writing is hardly surprising. However, two trends expressed themselves in this project in Bengal. Firstly, the indigenous historical narrative attempted to disengage and differentiate itself from such colonial notions. Thus in 1875, several newspapers reacted to Sir Richard Temple's decision to include history text-books by Lethbridge and Clarke in the syllabus of the Vernacular and Minor Scholarship Examinations by pointing out that numerous historical works had been written in Bengali by Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Jadugopal Chatterjee, Tarini Charan Chatterjee, Krishna Chandra Roy, Nilmani Basak and others.<sup>22</sup> Although the Som Prakash, had included Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar and Ramgati Nyayaratna as historians of Bengal, Ramgati Nyayaratna had written The History of Bengal Part I and Vidyasagar had written the second part. The History of Bengal, Part II, had as its chronological period the ascension of Siraj-ud-daulah to the arrival of Lord Bentinck. Vidyasagar wrote in his Preface that the last ten chapters were a 'partial translation of Marshman's History of Bengal'.<sup>23</sup> Both texts had seen numerous editions by the 1870s, and their importance as text books cannot be denied. However, the insistence on a different historiography which could refute the British

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<sup>22</sup>See Pratidhwani, 13 July 1875, Saptahik Samachar, 13 July 1875 and Som Prakash, 19 July 1875 in Reports of the Native Newspapers: Bengal, (hereafter, RNP), No. 30 of 1875, pp. 2-4.

<sup>23</sup>Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar, Banglar Itihas, Part II, ('History of Bengal'), Calcutta, 21st edition 1876, Preface.

historiographers of India had resulted in a different type of history text-book.<sup>24</sup>

Kedarnath Datta's Bharatbarsher Itihas (1860) is a good example of this 'new' historiography. Dedicating the book to the Rev. James Long, Kedarnath wrote:

this history of India is the first original work of the kind, and I feel myself contented in filling a desideratum ... The wild notions of men like Mill, Ward and Marshman, their misinterpretation of Hindoo character, manners etc., have been strenuously impugned.<sup>25</sup>

While Datta's project was to disprove colonial allegations, a parallel trend was to cite Indian history within a framework of world history.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the earlier tendency, the location of India within the continuum of world history articulated the need for inclusion within a framework defined by European historians. Thus a multiplicity of tensions stretched out the historical discourse even as it sought to anchor its sense of a historically recognised identity. These tensions operated both from within - in the process of selection that identified its essential constituents, and from without - in the choices exercised in the deployment of European modes of comprehension, classification and formulation. In this struggle to produce an appropriate vehicle for conveying this sense of history, there was a complex interplay

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<sup>24</sup>A.R. Mallik distinguishes between a 'Period of Imitation'(1800-75) and a 'Period of Enquiry'(1875-1925) in 'Modern Historical Writings in Bengali', 1961. However, we are here concerned with the ways in which European structures of understanding crept into the indigenous historical writings of Mallik's 'Period of Enquiry', even as it articulated a different perspective.

<sup>25</sup>Kedarnath Datta, Bharatbarsher Itihas, ('A History of India'), Calcutta, 1860), Dedication.

<sup>26</sup>This is indicated in the titles themselves, for example, Nilmani Basak, Itihas-sar: Ati Prachin Kalabdhil Bartaman Kal Paryanta Iyoroop, Esia, Afrika O Amerikar Sanskhep Brittantar, ('The Essence of History: A Brief Account of Europe, Asia, Africa and America from Ancient to Present Times'), Calcutta, 1859, or, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's Puravritta-sar ('The Essence of Ancient History'), Calcutta, 1860.

between fact and fiction, myth and history, as well as between 'truth' and the imagination. Therefore, even as the Hindu's lack of an historical understanding had become an issue for the colonial historian, so history-writing with its capacity to articulate an oppositional view became an important technique for articulating and formulating an archaeology of a Hindu self.

If colonial denigration had targeted depraved custom (especially Hindu), the researches of the Orientalist scholars had elevated Hinduism as emanating from the venerable site of a flourishing, ancient civilisation. Within such a construction the present degeneration of the Hindu's character into an idolatrous and superstitious one had been induced by Muslim intervention. The Hindu was thus identified as a victim-figure, and his deliverance from colonial imputations of being ignorant, prejudiced and superstitious, constituted a part of the Orientalist mission. Friedrich Max Muller, in his defence of the 'native Hindu' character therefore evoked the dreadful nature of Muslim rule - 'after reading the accounts of the terrors and horrors of Mohamedan rule, my wonder is that so much of native virtue and truthfulness should have survived'.<sup>27</sup> By positing the Muslim as the repulsive and barbaric Other, Max Muller established Hinduism as a set of currently corrupted manners that required an urgent rescue.

The arguments put forward by Max Muller typified the Orientalist approach to India as the site of an ancient civilisation. It was from such roots that the nineteenth-century myth of the 'golden age' of ancient Indian civilisation sprang. This

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<sup>27</sup>F. Max Muller, 'On the Truthful Character of the Hindus', Collected Works of Friedrich Max Muller, Vol XIII, 1883 rpt., London, 1910, p. 72.



appealed immensely to early nineteenth century reformers like Rammohun Roy and Debendranath Tagore who appropriated it to introduce reform without rupturing what they perceived to be the essential fabric of a greater Hindu community.<sup>28</sup> This greater Hindu community was perceived to consist of the successors of the ancient Aryans, as we have explained in Chapter I. Additionally in the writing of historical self-descriptions, the category, Aryan, formed an important segment of the reconstituted Hindu identity. The conquering Aryans had established themselves in ancient India and historical discourse clearly designated these people as the ancestors of the Hindus. Originally, as one nineteenth-century historian tells us the ancient inhabitants of India lacked ethics and religion. Although very little is available by way of description, says Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, a 'consideration of the uncivilised races like the Santhals and the Kols who have descended from them, indicate that huge trees, stones and objects that generated fear were worshipped as gods by them'.<sup>29</sup> With the coming of the Aryans a superior culture was introduced. 'A race more superior to the ancient inhabitants of India arrived here from the North-west direction. This was the Aryan race; they are our ancestors.'<sup>30</sup>

By identifying the 'superior' Aryans as ancestors, such historical constructions

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<sup>28</sup>See John Morearty, 'The Two-edged Word: The Treacherousness of Symbolic Transformation: Rammohan Roy, Debendranath, Vivekananda and the Indian Golden age' in Studies on Bengal: Papers Presented at the Seventh Annual Bengal Studies Conference, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 28-30 1971, Michigan, 1975, pp. 85-105.

<sup>29</sup>Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, Balya Shiksha Banglar Itihas, ('A Children's History of Bengal'), Habra, 1891, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

attempted to confirm the claims of Hindu superiority.<sup>31</sup> To certain sections this meant a validation of all articles of the Hindu faith. Thus in 1890, the paper Bangabasi mounted an agitation against R.C. Dutt's History of India because Dutt saw the Hindu gods Ram and Krishna as creations of the imagination.<sup>32</sup> Against the thrust of Bangabasi's arguments, a regional weekly with a smaller circulation raised a pertinent question : 'Can Mr Dutt's book possibly do more harm than is done by books written by European scholars?'<sup>33</sup> In missionary schools, the weekly continued,

Hindu children read the Bible and are daily told that their religion is full of superstition. But the religious sensibility of the Hindu are not hurt on that account, and it is certainly strange news that the society which tolerates this has been thrown into convulsions by the publication of Mr Dutt's book.<sup>34</sup>

While certain sections of the contemporary vernacular press thus argued about the rationalisation of Hindu gods and goddesses, the tendency to stress the superior Aryan origin of the Hindu continued. Thus an article on 'The Aryan Dynasty' which appeared in Arya Darshan in 1874, emphasised the connotations of being Aryan: 'We are using the word Aryan in the perspective which includes within it all the civilised

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<sup>31</sup>An interesting twist was later given to this construction by the Adi Hindu Movement of the untouchables in Uttar Pradesh in 1920s. Adi Hindus saw themselves as the original inhabitants of India dispossessed by Aryan invaders. See Nandini Gooptu, 'Caste, Deprivation and Politics: The Untouchables in U.P. Towns in the Early Twentieth Century', paper presented at the Labour and Dalit Workshop, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 29-30 November 1990. Publication forthcoming.

<sup>32</sup>After successfully removing the book from list of school text-books, the Bangabasi, congratulated the Hindu community for showing that it 'still possesses some vitality,' and hopes that 'as in this small affair, so in larger matters deeply affecting its interest,... that community will be able to fight and hold its ground.'Bangabasi, 31 May 1890, in RNP, no.23 of 1890, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup>Burdwan Sanjibani, 13 May 1890, in RNP, No. 21 of 1890, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

racess of Asia and Europe.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the reason for the fall of the Hindu was seen in the degradation of the Aryans in India which was related to the British presence.<sup>36</sup> By extension, although Hindu Aryans culturally equalled the dominant British, the denial of opportunities by the government prevented the Hindus from prospering. This notion of cultural equality also expressed itself in the deployment of the myth of common origins, as we shall see. Later, this pivotal position would be utilised by Vivekananda to argue for the universal superiority of Hinduism over other religions.

The Orientalist constructions of the 'golden age' thus precipitated the indigenous reconstructions of ancient India in certain significant ways. On the one hand, it aided in the depiction of Hinduism as a set of manners, a 'way of life' with spirituality as its primary defining feature, while on the other, it established certain continuities with the glorious past which could be reclaimed by eliminating corrupt practices that had arisen in recent times. Yet another offshoot of this particular Orientalist construction was its stress on the violent nature of Muslim invasion. These themes formed the basis of the contemporary reconstruction of a Hindu identity in Bengal, and in the project of history-writing these factors were constantly invoked.

Writing an antiquarian text on the Indo-Aryans in 1881, Rajendralala Mitra considered the demolition of ancient Hindu architecture in terms of Muslim destructiveness:

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<sup>35</sup>'Arya Bangsa', Arya Darshan, April-May, 1874, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup>'Mahomedan rule was favourable to the Hindus, as regards appointments to the Public Service and the impartial administration of justice.' Suhrid, 28 March 1876, RNP, No. 15 of 1876, p. 1.

Moslem fanaticism, which, after repeated incursions reigned supreme in India for six hundred years, devastating everything Hindu, and converting every available temple, or its materials into a masjid or a palace, or a heap of ruins, was alone sufficient to sweep away everything in the way of sacred buildings.<sup>37</sup>

For Rajendralal Mitra, this was enough to refute the allegation that ancient Indo-Aryans lacked sacred buildings. Ten years later, the same argument would be used to refute alleged lack of historical texts. Priyanath Mukhopadhyay's history textbook for school boys, written in 1891, employed a similar logic:

It is not certain why our ancient countrymen, who were so learned and had achieved so much did not write down any descriptions of the country. Some people say that they probably wrote such descriptions, but just in case reading histories of the glorious past should inspire people to rebel, the Muslims destroyed these books together with other good books when they conquered this country.<sup>38</sup>

The disruption caused by Muslims thus became the prime explanation for most absences. Other writers, however, emphasised that history as it was currently understood was only a recent phenomenon modelled on European histories. This view of history, often placed the history of India within a universal history of mankind. Nilmani Basak, writing a history of Europe, Asia, Africa and America for children, had commented in the context of this universal history in 1859:

History is like the eyes of man, knowledge increases if one reads it ... In this country this custom was almost absent. Nowadays, due to the establishment of Bengali pathshalas, to teach history has become the regulation.<sup>39</sup>

As opposed to earlier assertions that history existed in ancient Aryan culture,

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<sup>37</sup>Rajendralala Mitra, Indo-Aryans: Contributions towards the Elucidation of their Ancient and Medieval History, Vol I, London, 1881, pp. 6-7.

<sup>38</sup>Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, Balya-Shiksha Banglar Itihas, p. 20.

<sup>39</sup>Nilmani Basak, Itihas-sar, Preface.

Nilmani Basak claimed that history was an alien, albeit important, subject. Furthermore, Romesh Chunder Dutt maintained in 1877, that 'History continues to be studied in English and little progress has been made in this subject in the Bengali language, except in the matter of school books.'<sup>40</sup> Later, in 1886, in a history of the fall of Bengal, Rakhal Das Bhattacharya, confirmed that a knowledge of English was tied up with an individual knowledge of world history: 'There is no means of knowing the history of other countries if one does not know English.'<sup>41</sup> The nineteenth-century agenda of writing an indigenous history was thus intricately tied up with the related project of self-assertion for which a knowledge of other histories was essential. It was necessary for such a project, not only to delve the Indian past but to place that excavated past on a universal scale of values.<sup>42</sup>

On a more specific plane, history-writing became in Bengal an attempt to narrate a glorious past in terms of an adopted narrative. Through such a narration, the historical discourse sought to redeem some of the gross grievances brought about by Muslim rule. History was therefore seen as containing the basic elements of an evolving Hindu discourse. This was further reinforced by the correspondence envisaged between the ancient Aryan and the refined Hindu. As Baidyanath Barat stated in the Preface to his Arya-Darpan: Adhyatmik Aitihasik Upanyas, written in 1877: 'Wherever you find the word Hindu in this book please understand it to mean

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<sup>40</sup>R.C.Dutt, Cultural History of Bengal, 1877, rpt. Calcutta, 1962, p. 152.

<sup>41</sup>Rakhal Das Bhattacharya, Banger Adhonati, Calcutta, 1886, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup>Thus Chandranath Basu claimed that 'the mind of the Hindu was cosmically constituted' in his book Hindutva: Hindur Prakita Itihas, ('Qualities of the Hindu: The True History of the Hindu'), Calcutta, 2nd ed., 1903, p. 3.

Aryan.<sup>43</sup> Indeed the correspondence that was sought between the Aryan and the Hindu very often guided the demand for reform by remodelling distorted custom closer to the ancient ideal.

Geographically the territory occupied by the ancient Aryans was seen as corresponding to the present-day northern India:

The Vedic Hindus called themselves aryas, and the tract in which they settled themselves in India has the distinctive name of Aryadesa ... The Aryadesa or Arya-vartha [sic!] of Manu is bounded on the north by the Himalaya; and on the south by the Vindhyan chain.<sup>44</sup>

Thus on account of the specific geographical location, as well as shared original customs, the Aryans were envisaged as the predecessors of the present Hindu inhabitants of India. Most historical texts insisted upon this link as firmly as they validated the superiority of the ancient Aryans. Cultural superiority which was thus affirmed constituted the contemporary Hindu's claim to equality with the European. Rajanikanta Gupta, historian and political scientist, claimed this to be the reason why despite their appreciation of Western education, present-day Hindus were not awestruck with amazement. He illustrated this by approvingly quoting from Seeley's

Expansion of England:

Many travellers have said that the learned Hindu, even when he acknowledges our power and makes use of our railways, is so far from regarding us with reverence that he very sincerely despises us. This is only natural. We are not cleverer than the Hindu: our minds are not richer or larger than his ... He can match from his poetry our sublimest thoughts; even our science perhaps has

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<sup>43</sup>Baidyanath Barat, Arya Darpan: Arthat Adhyatmik Aitihasik Upanyas, ('Aryan-mirror: Or, A Spiritual Historical Novel', Calcutta: kabya Prakash Press, 1877), Preface, p. iv.

<sup>44</sup>Rajendralala Mitra, Indo-Aryans, Vol II, pp. 438-9.

few conceptions that are altogether novel to him.<sup>45</sup>

What is of particular significance in the portion chosen by Rajani Kanta Gupta is the deliberate disregard for Seeley's statement on the Aryans in India just two pages earlier. Seeley comments:

the Aryan race did not make so much progress in India as in Europe. As it showed in India an extreme incapacity for writing history, so that no record of it remains except where it came in contact with Greek or Mussulman invaders... No great political system grew up; there was little city-civilisation.<sup>46</sup>

Rajanikanta made a political choice in ignoring this part of Seeley's argument. It was Seeley's report of the testimony of English travellers in India Rajanikanta found more useful. He could then go on to argue that it was the innate superiority of the Hindus that lent justification to such testimonies. This argument was then extended to invalidate the oft-reiterated allegation that the Hindu was a slave of Western education:

On account of the legacy of knowledge that has been extended by the ancient Hindu Aryans, the Hindus have appreciated the education given by England, but have not been overwhelmed with wonder.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the Aryan heritage was recalled time and again and cohered around certain specific themes. Later, in the Swadeshi call for liberation the sons of Aryavarta were summoned to act in a manner that befitted an Aryan-Hindu. What made such thematic links possible was the underlying mythological principle that guided this

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<sup>45</sup> Sir J. R. Seeley, The Expansion of England, 1883 rpt., London, 1931, pp. 282-3. this passage is quoted in Bengali translation in Rajani Kanta Gupta, Bharat Prasanga, Calcutta, 1887, p. 212.

<sup>46</sup> Seeley, Expansion, p. 280.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

reconstructed historical discourse about the qualities that distinguished a Hindu.

### **The Mythological and the Historical: The Hidden Principles**

Partha Chatterjee has argued in his Itihasar Uttarahikar that the notion that history was guided by destiny was strictly a pre-colonial notion that faded away with the coming of age of English education. However, the fact that the guiding hand of destiny was seen to be operating in missionary accounts of British India seems to imply a different genealogy for this notion.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, a consideration of history-writing in general reveals myth and history to be integrated with each other even in the late-nineteenth century. This interlocking is so complex that myth often seems inseparable from the nineteenth-century historical consciousness. Both these activities have been perceived as capable of existing as complementary, rather than discrete, modes of consciousness in the field of psycho-history and religious studies.<sup>49</sup> However, the manner in which these ideas were deployed within the contemporary Bengali historiography demonstrates the interweaving of two distinct narrative structures in an attempt to grasp the past.

The complementarity of myth and history stem from the tendency both have to narrativise. Apart from which, within the various attempts at writing history in nineteenth-century Bengal, the desire to remember past glory was as much an attempt

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<sup>48</sup>Ballhatchet, 'Some aspects of Historical Writings', pp. 344-6.

<sup>49</sup>See Lee W. Gibbs and W. Taylor Stevenson (eds.), Myth and the Crisis of the Historical Consciousness, Missoula, 1975.



to come to terms with a degraded present as to visualise a nascent nation.<sup>50</sup> Myth narrativises about origins and first events in the life of a community,<sup>51</sup> while History attempts to chronicle events and discover the ordering principle, with an emphasis on linearity.<sup>52</sup> In the context of nineteenth-century Bengal, the mythic narrative emerged within the body of the historical narrative in the latter's struggle to remember and recall for its readers the past as creatively as possible.

Closely related to the complementarity of myth and history in this context is the centrality which is granted to the notion of Truth. The historical narrative expressed the struggle between the post-Enlightenment conceptualisation of historical truth as a description of facts or 'things as they actually happened' and universal truth as it was perceived by the mythic consciousness. While the nineteenth century positivist and rationalist attitude saw history as embodying truth which was verifiable, the complementary mythic consciousness tried to seek out truth which was eternal and had a cosmic dimension. Hence, in the case of the latter, truth was perceived to be

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<sup>50</sup>History-writing was only one of the ways of remembering past glory. As Paul Connerton has pointed out apart from the operation of a social memory, commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices are other ways in which societies remember. See Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember, Cambridge, 1989.

<sup>51</sup> While I am using the word 'community' here in its anthropological sense, my use of the term mythic narrative should be understood as being characterised by cyclicity of form as Cassirer defined it. See Ralph Manheim trans., Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol 2: Mythical Thought, New Haven, 1955.

<sup>52</sup>I differentiate the terms in order to stress that these discrete structuring principles do come together in nineteenth-century Bengali historiography. However, I am not proposing to use the terms fused together as an analytical tool. The term mythistory, framed by William McNeill in 1985, implies the existence of an unchanging tradition. For a critical discussion see, Joseph Mali, 'Jacob Burkhardt : Myth, History and Mythistory', History and Memory: Studies in Representations of the Past, Vol III: 1, Spring 1991, pp. 86-118.

irrefutable, for it was guaranteed by the authority and power of tradition. The interaction between these two notions of 'truth' brought about a transformation in the understanding of historical truth. Quite often the eternal and supra-historical truths envisaged by myth were perceived as being illustrated by history. The historical narrative therefore became part of a 'Grand Narrative' and historical events were often imaginatively elaborated for this purpose.

Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, in his Purabritta-sar echoed the common lament about the lack of history-books, commenting on the impossibility of knowing about one's own birth without the recollections of one's parents. By that same logic, Bhudeb tells us, human beings would never find out about their origins if the Creator himself had not spoken through religious texts, so justifying the use of mythology as the master narrative that guided and explained historical events.<sup>53</sup>

The justification of an inclusion of the mythical was often framed with reference to the Western, scientific conception of truth. Indeed even in school textbooks of history written specifically about the ancient Aryans, a preoccupation with Darwinism crept in. Lalmohan Vidhyanidhi Bhattacharya, Head Pandit at the Hugli Normal School, writing a book entitled Bharatiya Arya Jatir Adim Abastha in 1891, used Hindu mythology allegorically in order to explicate the superiority of Hinduism to Darwin's theory of evolution. In a Section entitled 'Dasa Avatar O Darwin Saheber Mat' or 'The Ten Incarnations and the Opinion of Darwin', he wrote:

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<sup>53</sup>Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Purabritta Sar, pp. 5-6.

Reader! you have of course heard that according to Darwin human beings are avatars of apes. if that be true then we must admit that a more powerful being will emerge after man. However, Indian Aryans do not imagine the creation of a more evolved being from a less evolved one. They think differently and they base their thinking on the will of god.<sup>54</sup>

He then proceeded to narrate the Hindu myth of creation seeing in it a symbolic meaning - a version of Darwin's evolution story. Vidyanidhi claims that the Matsya-avataar - Vishnu's incarnation as a fish - corresponded to the first stage of evolution whereby life began in water. In this way each avataar symbolised a stage in evolution and Western scientific ideas interplayed with indigenous ones in an attempt to authenticate tradition. Thus the historical discourse could profess the superiority of Hinduism which contained even within its mythology a rationalised story about origins.

At the more basic level of definitions the mythological interacted similarly with the historical. The titles of the texts we have considered so far, translated the word puravritta or purabritta as history. An article entitled 'Bharatiya Itihas' in the Arya Darshan edited by Yogendranath Bandyopadhyay Vidyabhushan, stated that the sixth century Sanskrit text, the Amarakosha, had identified history with puravritta, i.e., descriptions of the events of the past. From this, the article concluded that 'when the word history has been used in this irrefutable sense everywhere, then there can be no doubt that the ancient Aryans actually wrote history.'<sup>55</sup> The ethical content of the

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<sup>54</sup>Lalmohan Vidyanidhi Bhattacharya, Bharatiya Arya Jatir Adim Abastha, Calcutta, 1891, pp. 5-6.

<sup>55</sup>Anon., 'Bharatiya Itihas', ('Indian History'), Arya Darshan, November-December 1877, p. 376.

puravritta was of great significance and the nineteenth-century history text-books written in this form were attentive to this aspect. This directed the deployment of positivist notions of history within contemporary historiography regarding past events as gradually unfolding meaning for the use and good of man. The etymology of the Sanskrit word, itihasa which also translated as history was iti-ha-sa meaning 'so indeed it was'. However within the Sanskritic tradition, the term itihasa was also a literary genre which included legend, history, heroic poetry and oral accounts of past events.<sup>56</sup> The existence of these multiple literary forms enabled nineteenth-century historiography to incorporate a non-historical form like mythology into a historical narrative structure.

Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay incorporated this notion of the mythological into his allegorical Pushpanjali ('Offering of Flowers') written in 1876. In introducing this allegorical piece, Bhudeb quoted an English translation of Goethe's lines: 'Ordinary history is traditional, higher History [sic!] mythical, and highest mystical'<sup>57</sup>, thus indicating his intention to write a 'mystical history' of India. Pushpanjali was in fact an attempt to indicate the significance of the geographical parameters of the Hindu faith in the shape of successive dialogues between the sages Markendeya and Vyasa on their pilgrimage all over India.

This tendency expressed itself even in the less prominent writers of the period.

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<sup>56</sup>For a brief discussion of these terms see Amaresh Datta (ed.), Encyclopedia of Indian Literature, Vol. II, Delhi, 1988, pp. 1754-5.

<sup>57</sup>'Introduction', Pramathanath Bisi ed., Bhudeb Rachana Sambhar, ('The Works of Bhudeb'), p. 5.

Thus in Kedarnath Datta's Bharatbarsher Itihas, together with the refutation of Mill and Ward, the pedagogic nature of historical truth was also emphasised:

The word itihas means the description of all or some of the events in any place in the world, whether it be knowledge, religion, customs of the people, their character or their conflicts. These are narrated as examples by which men are able to procure enough knowledge. [For] any advice quoted with the help of examples is more useful.<sup>58</sup>

While Kedarnath Datta's aim was to refute historians like Mill on their own terms, he characteristically saw no conflict between his aim and his use of Hindu myth and astrology to periodise the ancient period of Indian history. The use of a temporal understanding which corresponded to the notion of time in the Puranas seemed an appropriate choice for historians who wrote ancient Indian history. Simultaneously the concept of the four yugas entered the discourse as a technique of self-description whereby the present state was identified as the kali-yuga.<sup>59</sup> Despite the incorporation of an alternative time-frame, the chronology also accommodated the colonial periodisation of history into ancient, medieval and modern, or Hindu, Muslim and Christian periods. This accommodation was negotiated by a Hindu version of universalism. Priyanath Mukhopadhyay employed such an argument when he made the basis of his universal acceptance of all faiths an adaptation of Krishna's advice to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. According to him:

The Aryan religion, the Buddhist religion, Islam and Christianity are all dictates of god. He has sent these decrees for man's protection in each Yuga, and because of that particular branches of Religion have been disseminated.

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<sup>58</sup>Kedarnath Datta, Bharatbarsher Itihas, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup>See Sumit Sarkar, 'Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies: Vol VI, Delhi, 1989, pp. 1-53.

Therefore no religion ought to be ignored.<sup>60</sup>

Interestingly Priyanath periodised history into a brief pre-Aryan and detailed Aryan period, followed by a period of Islamic rule and a period of Christian rule. Religion and, more importantly, culture were seen as characterising each period. However, despite the universalist claim for a democracy of all religions, the glory of the Aryans was not perceived as equalled by any other group.

In the quest for validating a Hindu identity, other techniques were also employed. While Kedarnath Datta's history was guided by the positivist idea of progress, he also used the post-Enlightenment myth of all societies passing through the same stages of progress - from barbarism to civilisation. The dominant European culture represented by the Greeks, the Romans and the English had to pass through a stage of barbarism before they became exemplars of civilisation. By this logic all civilised nations had a history of barbarism. The practices Kedarnath Datta chose to comment on were remarkably similar to practices in Hindu society that had been the subject of missionary condemnation. He wrote: 'If we follow the ancient period of the Romans, Greeks and the English, we shall see that in the beginning they were unnecessarily religious and worshipped innumerable imaginary gods and goddesses, and even made human sacrifices before these gods'.<sup>61</sup> The historical process therefore held out a promise of refinement to the 'degraded' Hindu race.

Apart from this notion of progress, a universal myth of the common origin of

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<sup>60</sup>Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, Balya-Shiksha Bangalar Itihas, p. 142.

<sup>61</sup>Kedarnath Datta, Bharatbarsher Itihas, p. 9.

all races was often adapted. One of the stories cited by Priyanath Mukhopadhyay illustrates this myth:

We hear from the ancient people that a person had two sons - one was god-fearing and religious and the other not so. Once, according to the customs prevalent in those times, that person performed the Gomedh Yagna (Ritual of the Cow Sacrifice) . This Sacrifice was performed by killing a cow. After the yagna, the second son stole some meat and ate it and was thus cursed by his father - 'Since you have stolen Cow's meat and consumed it, you have become the beef-eating Yavan from today.' From then on, his descendents called themselves Yavans and the descendents of the other brothers were called Brahmans. This story may not be true, but from this we are able to understand that Hindus and Muslims belonged to the same race at one time.<sup>62</sup>

Such myths effectively placed Hindus on the same plane as all 'civilised' races of the world. In another story the inhabitants of England are seen to have their roots in the mythic Aryavarta. The story of Yayati is narrated from the Mahabharata with its obvious scriptural overtones. Three of Yayati's sons were disobedient and hence disinherited and cursed. One of them, 'it is further stated, went to Svet-dvip ("The White Island"), that is England.'<sup>63</sup>

The mythic explanation of origins incorporated into the body of history textbooks indicates a mechanism of empowerment within the project of history-writing. In many ways the Hindu discourse as it expressed itself in contemporary Bengali historiography articulated its response to colonialism. On the one hand the use of mythological structures was seen as conserving an essentialised 'tradition' to which foreigners could have no access, on the other, the resurfacing of certain Enlightenment assumptions in mythological terms located Indians and the races that had conquered

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<sup>62</sup>Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, Balya-Shiksha Bangalar Itihas, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-4.

them on the same scale of equivalence. This created the ground for asserting that Indians/Bengalis/Hindus were in fact superior to the rest of the world. We shall turn to this aspect of the Hindu discourse in Chapter IV. The impetus for universalising on the basis of religion and spirituality was in fact drawn from Orientalist constructions that romanticised the Indian past. At the same time attempts were made to discover heroes who belonged to a less remote past. Within the present context these heroes were identified as the Rajputs and the Marathas. It was in Rajput and Maratha heroic legends that the colonially designated 'weak' and non-martial Bengali found an alternative heroic identity.

### **Embodiments of Aryan Courage: The Marathas and the Rajputs**

Nineteenth-century history-writing was also characterised by a sense of tragedy - perceiving the present degraded state of the Hindus in terms of a fall. While this may have emanated from Gibbon's The Decline and the Fall of the Roman Empire (1776-88), which many educated Bengalis read with avid interest,<sup>64</sup> most Bengali historians saw their tragedy in terms of a fall from a self-sufficient, superior and above all a patriotic society.

Official Bengali translator in the Bengal Government, Rajkrishna

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<sup>64</sup>It was common to read Gibbon even if it was not a prescribed text. Edward Gibbon's 12 volume history accompanied Debendranath Tagore when in 1872-3 he took the young Rabindranath with him to Bolpur. See Prashanta Kumar Pal, Rabi-Jibani, Vol I, p. 184. Gibbon's history was also a favourite of Swami Vivekananda, who read four volumes of it in three days. See S.N. Dhar, A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. I, Madras, 1975, p. 52.



Mukhopadhyay, whose Pratham Shiksha Bangalar Itihas, was hailed by Bankim as a path-breaking historical endeavour,<sup>65</sup> wrote in an essay in the Banga Darshan of 1884: 'O sons of India, remember the past glory of India and try for once to alleviate your ill-lot. Have you considered what you were and what you have become?'<sup>66</sup>

Historians like Rajanikanta Gupta saw in the present situation the same lack of patriotism. Rajanikanta singled out Western education as the prime cause for this lack in the Preface to his Arya Kirti:

Under the influence of a foreign civilisation, many foreign manners and customs now prevail in our society. School-boys now take ethical lessons from tales set in foreign countries and from lives of foreign people. As a result there is no place in their tender hearts for the love of their country or concern for its welfare ... It is within the context of this lamentable social situation that Arya Kirti is published.<sup>67</sup>

This book, literally translated as the 'Glorious Deeds of the Aryans', perceived the Rajputs, the Marathas and the Sikhs as the genuine descendants of the Aryans. In attributing this genealogy to the Rajputs, Rajanikanta was not concocting their ancestry. Rajanikanta was drawing upon the colonial theories of race prevalent in his time. Risley's anthropometric tests carried out in the 1880s had classified Indians into seven physical types, the second category of which was identified as 'The Indo-Aryan'

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<sup>65</sup>Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay called this the 'alms of gold' for Bengali history. See Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, 'Bangalar Itihas', Bankim Rachanabali, Vol II, (1954 rpt., Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, 1969), pp. 330-3.

<sup>66</sup>Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay, 'Bharat Mahima', Banga Darshan, III:10, December-January 1884, rpt. Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay, Narā Prabandha, Calcutta, 1885, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup>Rajanikanta Gupta Arya Kirti, (Calcutta, 4th ed. 1886), Preface.

and included the inhabitants of the Punjab, Rajputana and Kashmir.<sup>68</sup> Moreover colonial ethnology propagated for the purposes of recruitment to the army, had identified the Rajput as the good soldier relating it to the purity of his blood. 'the purer blooded he is, and the more free he is from the taint of aboriginal blood, the better soldier does he make.'<sup>69</sup>

The fifth category of Indian physical types identified by anthropometric assessments were the Mongolo-Dravidian or Bengali, whose specific claim to fame had very little to do with the warlike attributes of the Rajputs or Sikhs. As Risley stated, 'its members may be recognised at a glance throughout the wide area where their remarkable aptitude for clerical pursuits has procured them employment'.<sup>70</sup> Clerical pursuits, however implied a lack of heroism when juxtaposed with the Aryan races. Compared to the 'war-like races of the Punjab' the Bengalis did not 'have any stomach for fighting' but submitted tamely to the periodical raids of the hill people'.<sup>71</sup>

It was for the benefit of this category - the weak and incapable Bengalis, that Rajanikanta Gupta recalled the glorious deeds of the Aryans. For him, although Bengalis had gained Western education and hence employment, their lack of physical courage stemmed from an amnesia of past events. This past, despite being a past that

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<sup>68</sup>Imperial Gazetteer of India: Provincial Series: Bengal, Vol I, Calcutta, 1909, p. 293.  
Sir Herbert Risley, The People of India, 1908 rpt. Calcutta, 1915, p. 37.

<sup>69</sup>P.D. Bonarjee, A Handbook of the Fighting Races of India, Calcutta, 1899, p. 192.

<sup>70</sup>Imperial Gazetteer, Vol I, p. 294.

<sup>71</sup>Risley, The People of India, p. 43.

did not strictly speaking belong to Bengalis, had to be appropriated in order to arouse the noble sentiment of patriotism. The parameters of this oppositional history were thus indirectly determined by the mode of categorisation deployed by the colonial discourse. Moreover the Aryan theme became in the hands of the articulators of the Hindu discourse a defensive strategy for the bhadralok.

Rajanikanta's heroes included Rana Kumbha, Rai Mal and Rana Pratap. While he mainly followed Tod's Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, published in two volumes in 1829 and 1832, Rajanikanta contextualised the stories in terms of the lack of patriotism in contemporary Bengal. Stories of Rajput valour usually originated in Tod's Annals. From 1873 to 1898, at least two different Bengali translations of Tod's Annals were published.<sup>72</sup> However, Tod's popularity in contemporary Bengal is attested by the several attempts at translation as well as numerous plays, novels and poems that had Rajput protagonists.<sup>73</sup> Rajanikanta Gupta's history, then, seems to be a text representing the nineteenth-century preoccupation with a political self-definition. In this context Rajput acts of resistance became very significant.

One of the items Arya Kirti defined at the very outset is the nature of 'true' courage. Courage was defined in terms of nyaya and dharma. Both terms are codified in terms of Hindu standards, whereby nyaya refers to justice with an ethical base and

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<sup>72</sup>These were the anonymous Rajasthan Itibritta, Vol 1, 1872, which announced that it would be published every month; Yagneswar Bandyopadhyay's Sachitra Rajasthan, Vols 1-2, 1882-3, presented by Mahendranath Vidyanidhi, 4th edition 1906. Mahendranath hailed Tod's Rajasthan as 'our flag of victory!'. p. iii.

<sup>73</sup>For details of the literary works, too numerous to name here, see Barun Kumar Chakrabarti, Toder Rajasthan O Bangla Sahitya, Calcutta, 1984.

the related term dharma connotes the adherence to a sacred principle. Both terms become very important in Rajanikanta's delineation of the noble Aryans. For him, physical prowess was only one attribute. Aryans were defined by other qualities as well:

The deeds of the Aryans did not end with the wars they fought. Together with immense courage, they combined intelligence, truthfulness and charitable qualities and so are still worshipped by the whole world.<sup>74</sup>

Rajanikanta established that the Rajputs were the true inheritors of Aryan qualities and saw in them the embodiment of true courage. One such example of genuine Rajput courage, according to Rajanikanta, was Rana Kumbha of Mewar. Rajanikanta followed Tod's story of Kumbha, but gave it an interesting twist. The incident that is selected for Arya Kirti, is the Rana's able defence of Mewar when it was attacked by the joint forces of Malwa and Gujarat. Rajanikanta took from Tod the date of the battle i.e., 1440. He also followed him in stressing Kumbha's inadequate infantry and cavalry which numbered 100,000 and a mere 1400 elephants in order to accentuate the glory of Kumbha's victory. However, it was Kumbha's behaviour after his victory that won him great approbation from the author. Rajanikanta thus described the ideal hero:

In battle he had followed the dharma and technique of a gallant man; he had fought with the hope of winning, and finally even while victorious he did not abuse the dharma of a brave man. Like a genuine hero, he preserved the honour of the defeated and surrendering enemy. Not only did he set the King of Malwa free, he also gave him gifts before sending him to his own kingdom.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Rajanikanta Gupta, Arya Kirti, p. 117.

<sup>75</sup>Rajanikanta Gupta, 'Kumbha', Arya Kirti, p. 4.

Tod's version of the same tale differed in tone. Tod's source for this particular event was Abul Fazl and his description was charged with sarcasm:

Abul Fuzil relates this victory, and dilates on Koombho's greatness of soul in setting his enemy at liberty, not only without ransom but with gifts. such is the character of the Hindoo: a mixture of arrogance, political blindness, pride, and generosity. To spare a prostrate foe is the creed of a Hindoo cavalier, and he carries all such maxims to excess.<sup>76</sup>

In identifying its heroes, the emerging Hindu discourse, carefully sifted the qualities that were desirable. The emphasis on the spirit of the genuine hero and his generosity are special markers of the dharma of the true Aryan. In a related formulation, the existence of religiosity and the cultivation of physical strength were seen as characterising Guru Govind Singh, the Sikh leader, thus contradicting the association of physical debility with an overwhelming religiosity. According to Rajanikanta Gupta, stories narrated about Muslims in India in general and the Battle of Plassey in particular, showed that the only reason behind the victory of the Muslims or the British was that they were cunning - a quality that should be abhorred by the truly courageous. By emphasising the shameful negative quality of cunning, British military prowess could be denied.<sup>77</sup> Rajput deeds of courage marked them out as the truly brave sons of India quite different from the despicable Mughals and British:

Had Shahabuddin Ghorī not been cunning ... the Fortune of India might not have been drowned ... had Akbar not killed Jaimal through cunning, Chitor would not have belonged to the Mughals ... and had Lord Clive not cunningly won Mir Jafar and Jagat Seth over to his side, the British may not have gained suzerainty over Bengal, Bihar and Orissa; and without the conspiracy of

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<sup>76</sup>James Tod, Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, Vol I, 1829, rpt. London, 1914, p. 231.

<sup>77</sup>This is seen as a characteristic of nationalist historiography by R.C. Majumdar, 'Nationalist Historians' in C.H. Philips (ed.), Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, p. 423.

Captain Lawrence and Captain Nicholson, the British flag would not have flown triumphantly over Maharaja Ranajit Singh's kingdom. In India, many brave men have misused their bravery, but no such stain darkens the courageous deeds of the Rajputs.<sup>78</sup>

The elaboration of Rajput and Sikh tales of resistance had clear political overtones, but what Rajanikanta's narrative stressed was the fact that even the truly brave could be defeated by cunning and by an extension of that logic, a defeated people were not necessarily cowards. This became an important facet of the nineteenth-century cultural self-assertion.

These ingredients of a courageous Hindu identity were not confined to readers of works like Arya Kirti. They also shaped the construction of the heroic identity in the dominant literary genre of the period - the novel. While the integration of myth and history fused into the historical self-consciousness of the nineteenth-century Bengali, amongst its numerous manifestations, the novel, especially as historical romance offered a convenient fictive vehicle for this consciousness and the self-image it sought to incorporate. It was argued at the time of its emergence that the historical romance in Bengal was not part of a received literary tradition, but an attempt at transforming indigenous material into a given European model.<sup>79</sup> But while the resemblance between Bankim's heroine Ayesa and Scott's Rebecca is noticeable,

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<sup>78</sup>Gupta, Arya Kirti, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ramgati Nyayaratna's remark on the European inspiration behind Durgesnandini, one of Bankim's earliest attempt at an historical romance is typical. See Ramgati Nyayaratna, Bangla Bhasha O Bangla Sahitya, 1872 rpt. Calcutta, 1991. This kind of assessment continued until the 1960s when Srikumar Bandyopadhyay assessed the nineteenth century historical novels in terms of their historical precision. See Srikumar Bandyopadhyay, Banga Sahitye Upanysaer Dhara, Calcutta, 5th ed. 1965.

Bankim was drawing upon a particular indigenous nineteenth century 'tradition'. This 'tradition' as we have demonstrated perceived Rajput, Sikh and Maratha tales of resistance against Muslim aggression as paradigmatic heroic tales which had the power to oppose colonial notions about the lack of the fighting spirit in Bengali Hindus. Moreover, the lack of physical strength was distinguished from moral strength and the lack of the first was accounted for in terms of the colonial presence. The quality of biratva - a quality repeatedly stressed combined valour with moral rectitude. Therefore, in the Introduction to the fourth edition of Rajsimha which first appeared in February 1882, Bankim wrote:

The purpose of history can sometimes be fulfilled by the novel ... I have tried to explain in my essay entitled 'Bharatkalanka' (India's Disgrace), the reasons behind the downfall of India. The lack of physical strength amongst Hindus is not among the causes. There are no signs of physical strength among Hindus in the present century. The lack of exercise renders the whole human body weak. The same applies to nations. With British imperialism the physical strength of the Hindus has diminished. But it had never dwindled previously. The physical strength of the Hindus is my substance. As an example I have taken Rajsimha.<sup>80</sup>

The stress on historicity enabled Bankim to confront the concepts of truth, virtue and strength which were under attack. Bankim's narrative combined the authority of a well-known legend with the use of historicity as an empirical validation of truth. In Rajsimha the encounter between colonial notions of weakness and inadequacy and Rajput feats of valour was characteristically expressed through authorial comment. The great battle Aurangzeb plans against the Rajput Chieftain Rajsimha is likened to the

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<sup>80</sup>Bankim Chandra Chatterjee 'Introduction' to Fourth Edition of Rajsimha in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajanikanta Das (eds.), Bankim Centenary Edition of Radharani, Krishnakanter Uil and Rajsimha, Calcutta, 1950, p. 26. All quotations from the novel Rajsimha refer to this edition.

battle-feats of Xerxes. 'These two events compare with each other, making a third comparison impossible. We kill ourselves learning Greek history by rote, but know nothing of the history of Rajsimha. Such are the benefits of modern education!'<sup>81</sup>

R.C.Dutt, Bankim's younger contemporary, apart from his famous Economic History of India, was also drawn to themes of Rajput and Maratha valour. Interestingly Romesh Chunder wrote his novels in Bengali, as he himself confirms, on the advice of Bankimchandra.<sup>82</sup> His choice of the Bengali over the English language to verbalise a desirable image of the collective 'Indian' self, points to the fact that this pan-Indian self-image was in fact being forwarded for the edification of Bengalis. The two Bengali novels of R.C. Dutt, which deal with Maratha and Rajput glory are Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat (1878) and Rajput Jiban Sandhya (1879). While Romesh Chunder gleaned his material from Tod's Annals, several incorporations reveal these novels to be characteristic explorations of an identity in the making. In the first novel, in an imaginary elaboration, Shivaji meets with the dying Jai Singh of Amber. Jai Singh warns him about the treacherous Aurangzeb, who is rapidly turning his friends into his enemies. Through a grand vision of the future, the Rajput chief confers on Shivaji the mantle of the future ruler of Delhi:

Shivaji! I can see the blaze of war lighting up on account of this treachery -

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<sup>81</sup> Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay Rajsimha, p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> "You will never live by your writings in English,... Your uncles Gobinda Chandra and Sashi Chandra and Madhusudan Datta were the best educated men of the Hindoo College in their day. Govind Chandra and Sashi Chandra's English poems will never live, Madhusudan's poetry will live as long as the Bengali language will live." These words created a great impression on me, and two years after this conversation, my first Bengali work, Banga Bijeta, was out in 1874.' R.C. Dutt, Cultural Heritage of Bengal, 1877, rpt. Calcutta, 1962, p. 147.



it flares up in Rajasthan, in Maharashtra and in the East! Aurangzeb is unable to put out that fire despite twenty years of effort ... The fire is becoming more intense, it is crackling forth from all sides and consuming the Mughal empire! And then? then [I see] the fortune of the Maharashtrian race ascending - Maharashtrians! proceed and occupy the empty throne of Delhi!<sup>83</sup>

This exhortation to Shivaji and Jai Singh's vision brings together the Rajput and the Maratha - the two powers who were seen to be the 'genuine' descendents of the Aryans.<sup>84</sup> By bringing together these two powers Romesh Chunder's novel demonstrates to us the mode of functioning of the imagination and the manner in which it constructed a pan-Hindu identity. By association, the Marathas and the martial Rajputs came to represent the military capability of the Hindus in general. At the same time, Romesh Chunder's epigraphs for each chapter are from the popular Bengali poems of Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Kashiram Das and Michael Madhusudan Datta, and indicate that the rise of Maratha power should be seen as illustrating the universal principle of the final triumph of right over wrong. The parallels drawn between legendary and historical situations are telling. The epigraph quoted in Chapter VII of Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat is from Michael Madhusudan Datta's Meghnad Badh Kavya.<sup>85</sup> Here Meghnad's condemnation of his traitor uncle,

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<sup>83</sup>Ramesh Chandra Datta, Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat, in Jogesh Chandra Bagal (ed.), Ramesh Rachanabali: Samagra Upanyas, Calcutta, 1960, p. 282.

<sup>84</sup>A similar construction is noticeable in Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's fictional Svapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas. Here, India is ruled by a descendent of Shivaji, Raja Ramchandra crowned by Shah Alam. The army which protects this imagined India is composed of Sikh and Maratha soldiers. See Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Svapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas, ('A History of India Envisioned in a Dream') in Bhudeb-Rachanasambhar, p. 341 ff.

<sup>85</sup>Michael Madhusudan Datta's famous lines through which the heroic Meghnad addresses his uncle are: 'Pray tell your servant, By which law of dharma/Have you abandoned kinship, brotherhood and race?' Meghnad Badh Kavya: Canto VI, Khetra Gupta (ed.), Madhusudan Rachanabali, Calcutta, 1965, p. 88.

Bibhishan, are applied to Raja Yasvant Singh, the Rajput traitor who had strengthened the hands of Aurangzeb by fighting against the Marathas.<sup>86</sup> The parallel indicated by this analogy was obviously not lost on the first readers of Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat, who were thus provided with enough authorial guidance to relate the heroic Shivaji and Rajput heroes with heroes reconstructed from Hindu mythology. The invention of this parallel was indeed a nineteenth-century Bengali phenomenon.<sup>87</sup> By contrast, in the earlier century Maharashtrians far from being identified as heroes were identified with the marauding Bargis who had raided Bengal between 1742 and 1751, as evidenced by descriptions in Gangaram's Maharashtra Puran of 1751.<sup>88</sup> This perception remained among sections that were excluded from constructing this heroic identity, as Uma Chakravarti has persuasively argued: 'While the Marathas were being transformed into champions of nationalism, sections left out from participating in such myths were still voicing their perception of the Marathas as marauders.'<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>As the Maratha Messenger tells Yaswant Singh in the novel: 'You will kill hundreds who belief in the same religion, Hindus will smash the heads of Hindus... in the end the Mleccha emperor will be victorious'. Dutt, Maharashtra Jiban Prabhat, p. 166.

<sup>87</sup>Shivaji's life and his ideals as exemplified by Romesh Chunder and others were given more explicit nationalist interpretation in the works of Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar at the turn of the century. We shall discuss the implications of these reconstructions in Chapter V.

<sup>88</sup>See Gangaram, Maharashtra Puran, Edward Dimock and Pratul Gupta (eds.), Honolulu, 1965. Also, Anima Mukhopadhyay, Atharo Shataker Punthite Itihas Prasanga, Calcutta, 1987).

<sup>89</sup>Chakravarti cites the Bengali lullaby: *Chheley Ghumolo, para jurolo bargi elo deshey/ Bulbulite dhan kheyechhe, khajna debo kishe* - ('My child sleeps, the neighbourhood is peaceful. Suddenly the Bargis come; the birds have destroyed all the crops, with what shall we pay the revenue?) see Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, New Delhi, 1989, p. 79.

## Aryan Women: Mythical and Historical

In the course of describing the courageous deeds of India's brave sons, Rajanikanta Gupta does not forget the country's dauntless daughters. While most of the stories closely follow Tod, what is significant to the formation of a Hindu cultural identity is the way in which the women are represented and the aspects of heroism which are emphasised. Rajanikanta narrates the stories of Sanjukta and Tarabai, as also the story of Rajbai, the ruler of Udayan, and Karmakumari who dies bravely fighting against the enemies of her husband. I shall discuss what constituted the exemplary nature of these women figures in Chapter III. Here I shall focus on the way in which the historical, legendary and mythical merge to create a web of paradigmatic figures who represent the virtues of an Aryan/Hindu legacy.

In Part III of Arya Kirti Rajanikanta narrates the story of Krishna Kumari, in Abalar Atmatyag. The story of Krishna Kumari was a popular tale in Bengal, earlier adapted from Tod in 1861 by Michael Madhusudan Dutta in a play of the same name. Rajanikanta's version closely follows Tod. Tod sees the sacrifice of the 'Virgin Princess Kishna' as being similar to the Iphigenia story from Greek mythology. However, in a footnote to Krishnakumari's dying words to her mother - 'We are marked out for sacrifice from our birth' - Tod explains that she was 'alluding to the custom of infanticide'.<sup>90</sup> In Rajanikanta's story her self-sacrifice is represented as an

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<sup>90</sup>James Tod, Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, Vol I, p. 368.

confirmation of her Kshatriya nature.<sup>91</sup> Thus Krishna Kumari tells her mother: 'The daughters of Kshatriyas come into the world to sacrifice their lives in defence of their honour.'<sup>92</sup> Rajanikanta hastens to add that Krishnakumari's sacrifice was not for the sake of individual honour, but for the honour of her country and her father.<sup>93</sup>

However, once again, courage was seen as one of the defining characteristics of Aryan womanhood. The mythological and the historical also overlapped in discursive attempts to divert attention from the colonial and missionary focus on the lack of education amongst Hindu females. Mahendranath Vidyanidhi, writing An Historical Sketch of the Aryan-Hindu Women of the Vedic, Upanishadic and Puranic Period, in 1887, included in his sketch, mythical characters, like Jatila, Debahuti and Bisistha. The Foreword, written by Bidhubhusan Mitra reads:

Today is a happy day for womankind! It's also a joyful day for the advocates of female education! Who will not be happy to hear that women had composed Vedic hymns? Everyone is aware of the happiness experienced when a woman is able to defend herself with her own debating powers before Brahmins learned in the Vedas.<sup>94</sup>

While on the one hand such texts indicated a deliberate effort to encourage and inspire women to educate themselves, the absence of examples from real life is remarkable.

Nilmani Basak, an earlier writer, followed the 'invented' conventions of this

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<sup>91</sup>On the other hand, in the anonymous translation of Tod's Annals entitled Rajasthanar Itibritta Vol I, (1872), Krishna Kumari says she does not fear death because she was born of a 'brave mother'. Rajasthanar Itibritta, p. 241.

<sup>92</sup>Gupta, Arya Kirti, p. 140.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>94</sup>Mahendranath Roy Vidyanidhi, Prachin Arya-ramaniganer Itivritta, ('An Historical sketch of the Aryan Hindu Women of the Vedic, Upanishadic and Puranic Period'), Calcutta, 1887, Foreword.

historiography by actually narrating the 'lives' of mythical figures. Basak's Nabanari, the fourth edition of which was published in 1865, narrated the stories of Sita, Savitri, Sakuntala, Damayanti, Draupadi, Lilavati, Khana, Ahalyabai and Rani Bhabani. Among these the first five belonged to the aegis of myth, the next two to legend, and only the last two were actual historical figures. The Preface indicated that this book was published in the hope that young girls seeking education would follow 'the pure ways ... exemplified by these characters.'<sup>95</sup> But the Preface also took care to historicise, stating that as 'there does not seem to be any available data about the dates of birth or deaths of the women whose lives are narrated in this book, therefore we have omitted such information'.<sup>96</sup>

While some texts attempted to historicise the mythical, others imbued historical events with mythological significance. Indeed, as we shall see in Chapter III, this tendency characterises the nineteenth-century Hindu discourse. Durgadas Lahiri writing his Dvadas Nari, or 'Twelve Women' in 1884, included the lives of Rajput heroines, Lakshmi Bai (Rani of Jhansi), Rani Bhabani and Rani Rasmani. The only legendary figure included is Behula. However, in narrating the story of Lakshmi Bai, the author identifies the source of her heroic defiance as originating in the insult to her husband by the English Resident, for after all, 'the husband is the idol and the fulfilment of the sati'.<sup>97</sup> In Chapter III, we shall look at the links between the heroic sati and Hindu

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<sup>95</sup>Nilmani Basak, Nabanari, ('Nine Women'), Calcutta, 4th edition 1865, Preface.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid, Preface.

<sup>97</sup>Durgadas Lahiri, 'Birangana Lakshmi Bai', 'The Heroic Lakshmi Bai' in Dvadas Nari, ('Twelve Women'), Calcutta, 1884, p. 101. The story of Lakshmi Bai was elaborated by Rajanikanta Gupta in his Sipahi Yuddher Itihas, Vol I, ('A History of the Great Sepoy War'),

identity in greater detail. Within nineteenth-century historiography, however, the notion of the sati-sabitri became a means of mythologising the historical and inscribing a heroic identity on the colonial script of shamed womanhood.<sup>98</sup>

Thus it becomes possible to see how myth and history constantly impinge on each other. The interweaving of the mythical and historical narrative seems significant in the light of Mill's rationalist rejection of mythology's claim to history. The underlying principle of the inclusion of myth within the narrative of nineteenth-century indigenous history-writing represented a different aspect of the rationalistic approach, yet one which was perceived to be equally valid. Myth, therefore, contained for the articulators of contemporary historical consciousness the essence of the cultural roots of their oppositional identity. Embedded in this was also the recognition that myth has a certain power, not just in the abstract sense of the term, but, on account of being culture-specific, it could deny access to an alien culture. Therefore inaccessible mythical material forms a part of the identity forged through history-writing and does so with the purpose of appearing impenetrable to the coloniser who claimed that truth had to be 'verifiable'. The very notion of truth deployed within such historiography, questioned the veracity and authenticity of colonial historical writings and opposed it by asserting and valorising its heroic self-descriptions.

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Calcutta, 1876. By the 1890s the story of her defiance of British rule had become very popular. Chandicharan Sen's novel, Jhansir Rani, ('The Queen of Jhansi') ran into its second edition in 1894. Later, in 1903, Jyotirindranath Tagore based his Jhansir Rani on the Marathi biography of the queen by Dattatreya Balvant Parasnisi.

<sup>98</sup>Kedarnath Datta considers in some details Ward's characterisation of Indian women as promiscuous in his Bharat barsher Itihas, Calcutta, 1860, pp. 30-2.

## Hindu Historiography and the 'Mlechha'

As we have seen the heroism of the Hindus in the ancient and in the recent past was defined in terms of their opposition to the Muslims, identified as yavan or mlechha. The application of mythological approach to historical material was a project imbued with power that triggered off another significant process - the process of identifying the Other. Articulated within colonial parameters, this discourse often identified its Other as the British, hence the straining to evaluate Hindu achievement against Western standards of courage and physical prowess. However, the battles of the Rajputs and the Marathas were waged against the Muslims, and quite often the historical narrative set up terms of contrast between the Hindu and the Yavana or the Hindu and the Mlecchas. This important distinction endorsed a specifically Hindu cultural identity for this self-descriptive discourse.

As we have demonstrated in Chapter I, such a divide had been precipitated by colonial classification of communities as 'martial' and 'non-martial'. Moreover, these stereotypes had come to be more sharply focused on the Hindu part of Bengal's population, rather than the Muslims. W.W. Hunter, writing The Indian Musalmans in 1871, had considered the exclusion of the Muslims of Lower Bengal from appointments in the army not in terms insult to their martial qualities, but as a restriction imposed over their earlier monopoly of official life. 'No Muhammadan gentlemen of birth can enter our Regiments;' wrote Hunter, 'and even if a place could be found for him in our military system, that place would no longer be a source of

wealth.’<sup>99</sup>

Despite Hunter’s rationalisation, the theory of the martial races as it was elaborated in the 1890s included amongst Muslims, Pathans, Baluchis, Punjabi and Hindustani Mahommadans but not the Mahommadans of Bengal.<sup>100</sup> Although, the number of Muslims in the Defence Services in Bengal proper were higher than the Hindus, most of them were probably non-Bengalis.<sup>101</sup> The denigration and exclusion of Muslims, however, hardly concerned the articulators of the nineteenth-century Hindu discourse which screened out and responded to only the Hindu components of the colonial stereotype of the ‘weak’ Bengali. This process was further intensified by the choice of a history which chose as its heroes those who defied Muslim ‘tyranny’. On the one hand this functioned as an analogy for the militant opposition to British rule, while on the other it alienated the Muslim population of Bengal.

Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay had written his book Pratham Shiksha Banglar Itihas for school children in 1874. He had pointed out that ancient Bengalis were a powerful race which had colonised Ceylon and the Sena kings had ruled over one third of India - a theme which would be recalled during the Swadeshi period when a more specifically nationalist Bengali identity came to framed. Moreover, Rajkrishna had also tried to establish that Muslims did not conquer Bengal in a day. While acknowledging the reforms introduced by the British, he also pointed out several

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<sup>99</sup>W.W. Hunter, The Indian Musalmans, 1871 rpt., Lahore, 1964, p. 187.

<sup>100</sup>This classification is conspicuous in P.D. Bonarjee, Handbook of the Fighting Races of India Calcutta, 1899.

<sup>101</sup>Rafiuddin Ahmed, The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity, 1981, Delhi, 2nd ed., 1988, p. 154.



damaging aspects of British rule which had caused Bengal's downfall.<sup>102</sup>

The vehicle of history became in the hands of nineteenth-century Bengali historians, an analogy for militantly driving out the British. This would be achieved by the reassertion of Hindu heroism which had proved itself against the Mughal. Simultaneously this discourse signalled a dissociation from the Muslim population. The two terms most frequently used to describe Muslims within this discourse are yavana and mleccha. Although, the term Yavana was at times given a different gloss,<sup>103</sup> it was generally identified as Muslim. In Bankim Chandra's Ananda Math, the battle of the Santans is stated in terms of a crusade. Satyananda tells Mahendra that the Santans are a sect of Ascetics. 'We do not want a kingdom - we only want to finish off the Muslims and their clans because they despise god.'<sup>104</sup> Moreover, Rajput heroism was often illustrated through their battles against the Mughals. By the 1890s, however, the power of the emerging Hindu discourse even as it set up its heroes was being perceived as distressingly divisive by sections of the Muslim press. In 1893, the Sudhakar warned about the harm done by writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay and Romesh Chunder Dutt:

[The] young Bengali Deputy Magistrate dipped to his finger tips in English

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<sup>102</sup>These are usual complaints : lack of employment in government posts, the harm done to Bengali textile traders and the increase in the consumption of alcohol among the educated class. Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay, Pratham Shiksha Bangalar Itihas, Calcutta, 1877, p. 95.

<sup>103</sup>'Prachin O Adhunik Bharatbarsha', Banga Darshan, July-August, 1873. In a footnote, the author explains: 'No one should understand the term yavana to mean Muslim. There is proof that in ancient times, yavana or yon meant the Greeks of Assyria. In some texts, the yavanas have been described as fallen kshatriyas'. p. 221.

<sup>104</sup>Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Ananda Math, in Bankim Rachanabali, Vol I, Calcutta, 1954, p. 698.

Culture and fond of imitation like all his race...thinking pipe in mouth of a fit subject for a poem ... [finds] the great Sanskrit epics ... far above the pitch of his own feeble voice ... [at last comes to] Tod's Rajasthan ... where fancy predominates over fact and which is based on information supplied by Rajput Bhats and the family histories of the boastful Rajputs.<sup>105</sup>

Having questioned the veracity of Tod's account, the report then set out to demonstrate to its readers the treacherous intent of such writings:

The Babu sees that in Rajasthan at least the Hindu rode on horses, brandished arms, fought battles and had Mussalmans for his antagonists ... So he sets to write his work calling the Musulmans yavanas, painting the Rajput princes as the very impersonation of purity, nobleness and kindness, and the Mussalman emperors as monsters of lust, cruelty and meanness ... Like the author of Padmini Upakhyan, Babu Bankim too, has been followed by a troop of imitators who have flooded the country with novels in which the Mussalmans are abused right and left and in which the Hindus are extolled as accomplishing doughty feats of arms.<sup>106</sup>

Furthermore, this harsh piece of criticism also indicated that the Western-educated Bengali Babu, in his eagerness to gain favours from the British Government: 'in their idle dream of an uninterrupted possession of the favour of the English Government, thought it unnecessary to respect the feelings of the Mussalmans'.<sup>107</sup> This passionate criticism only confirmed the way in which the components of the Hindu identity as it came to be projected in nineteenth-century Bengal were perceived. In attempting to anchor a heroic past, incidents from Rajput and Maratha history were matched against a grid of Aryan ideals, which necessarily precluded the Muslims. Among the key figures of this barbed attack were the articulators of such erroneous histories - the English-educated Babus highly placed in the government administration.

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<sup>105</sup>Sudhakar, 15 September 1893, RNP, No. 38 of 1893, p. 831.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., pp. 832-3.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p. 833.

The English-educated Bengalis were mainly Hindus in the nineteenth century. In their efforts to differentiate their history from the colonial histories of Bengal, they identified Muslims as tyrants although parallel efforts to include Islam in the universal Hinduism propounded during this period also existed. As in the case of the Hindu Mela, the project of history-writing was additionally the effort of an educated class which was gradually gaining in confidence. History held up a mirror, as it were, to their self-image as leaders - and to achieve this desirable reflection they saw no reason to include the Muslim in any positive way.

### **Class Ideology and the Writing of History**

For whom were such alternative histories written? Bankim had maintained that it was for the edification of Bengalis so ignorant of their predecessors. On the other hand, Rajanikanta Gupta opened his Arya Kirti by taunting his Western-educated readers. Addressing the educated middle-class who allegedly 'imported' their nationalist sentiments from abroad,<sup>108</sup> Rajanikanta said:

Reader! You have read of the deeds of Mazzini; and you have been deeply moved by the courageousness of Garibaldi; and you have bowed to the firmness in the character of Washington; and in the end, you have tried to make an example of Mazzini's self-sacrifice, in all your serious speeches;... But there was a time, when in this very land of your birth - in this misfortune-ridden and tortured land - the same determination and self-sacrifice

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<sup>108</sup>Mazzinni and Italian nationalism had a tremendous impact on Bengali nationalism. The Arya Darshan had serialised Yogendranath Vidyabhushan's 'Joseph Mazzinni O Nabya Italy', between August 1875 - January 1877, later published as a book with the same title in February 1880. See also Gita Srivastava, Mazzinni and his Impact on the Indian National Movement, Allahabad, 1982.

was evident. Follow the track of History and you will understand.<sup>109</sup>

This history was conceived as a testimony of the glorious past, shared, as we have demonstrated by all Hindus. At another level, the Aryan-Hindu ancestry that was forwarded by the articulators of an oppositional history, saw parallels between Rajput and Maratha glory and their future-image as a powerful social group which would rule and direct. The coming into being of such a group was strongly hinted at in several journal articles. One such article speculating on the ill-fate of the Bengalis published in 1873 in Bankim's Banga Darshan, saw middle-class leadership as becoming an actuality quite soon:

The hopes and trust of Bengal rest with those of this class ... There is no doubt that their responsibilities are very important, but they are striving to become capable of carrying the burden of that responsibility. In a short while they have excelled in education. Whatever, administrative posts can be secured by Bengalis, they have been acquiring. They have also become the advisors of the elite.<sup>110</sup>

As we have seen, in Chapter I, the articulators of this discourse saw themselves as the educated 'middle-class' and it would not be appropriate to see them in Broomfield's terms as the cultural elite of Bengal. According to their own self-descriptions they saw themselves as occupying a cultural middle ground and negotiating a space between the ruling British and their own landed elite, the zamindars. Therefore, even as it sought in Rajput and Maratha legends a historical sense of its past certain spiritual qualities which would befit future leaders were seen

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<sup>109</sup>Rajanikanta Gupta, Arya Kirti, p. 65.

<sup>110</sup>'Bangabhumi Shashyashalini Baliya Ki Bangalir Durbbhagya?', ('Are the Bengalis Unfortunate because their land is Fertile?'), Banga Darshan, September-October 1873, pp. 266-7.

as qualities yet to be acquired.

The same concern for a national identity in historical terms, was stated slightly differently in the first attempts at institutionalising history-writing in the Bengali journal Aitihāsik Chitra, Akshyay Kumar Maitreya in 1899. Rabindranath Tagore, expressed in the Foreword of the first issue, the joy experienced in independent effort.<sup>111</sup> Seeing this first historical journal as extending the literary achievements of the journal the Banga Darshan to a historical field, Tagore stated the purpose of history in terms that coincided with Bankim Chandra's earlier formulations, yet not without an additional twist:

By learning by rote the history written by others, one can pass examinations and become a scholar, but the endeavour to collect and write historical account of one's own country can never be mere scholarship. That effort lets fresh currents flow in the stagnant waters of our minds.<sup>112</sup>

Likening the journal to a indigenous factory, Tagore asserted:

The raw material are collected from our country and transformed into craft items in England. When they are sold here at a high price we are not even aware that its original material was collected from our land ... However, in trade and in literature, should India remain in the shape of raw material? Will these be of no use to us until the foriegner comes and collects it for his factory? Aitihāsik Chitra is being inaugurated as a swadeshi factory of Indian history.<sup>113</sup>

Tagore's hopes, however, clearly rested on the efforts of the emerging middle-class

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<sup>111</sup>Several contemporarry reviews of the journal expressed this nationalist dimension. Pradip edited by Ramananda Chattopadhyay said in its review of Aitihāsik Chitra that though nationalism is a Western concept 'our nationalist desire must necessarily have a historical foundation.' The journal was seen as fulfilling this need. 'Review of Aitihāsik Chitra', Pradip, April-May 1899, p. 155.

<sup>112</sup>Rabindranath Tagore, 'Suchona', Aitihāsik Chitra, Vol I: 1, January 1899, p. 2.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-4.

and the elite. If the journal hoped to compile historical records it had to depend on the good will and patronage of the zamindars. Tagore said:

I cannot hope [this] from the whole of India, but certainly if local historical records were collected from all the districts of Bengal, if each zamindar cooperates, so that Aitihasik Chitra can have access to whatever material is there in the old offices of the ancient ruling families of Bengal. Only then will this journal be successful.<sup>114</sup>

The aim and purpose of such research can thus be seen as an attempt to disclose the 'authentic' past by portraying the history of the leaders of society. This 'new' history would refute the claims of Orientalist research on grounds of its lack of sincerity but preserve the indigenous social hierarchy. This search as metaphorically described by Tagore as a 'swadeshi factory', had as much to do with the foundation and construction of a self-image as with the dramatic history of the nationalist imagination. The journal ambitiously aimed at collecting historical material from diverse range of sources including oral sources. However, despite its wider aims in comparison with the historical writings of the 1860s, Akshyay Kumar Maitreya stated the general purpose of history in terms that corresponded to definitions forwarded by Hindu historiography. Akshyay Kumar defined itihasa by relating the whole concept to tradition:

Ancient narratives which advise us about Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha are called itihasa - such is our ancient tradition. Accordingly, although the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are poems, they are included within the aegis of history.<sup>115</sup>

Thus within the vast expanse which such a definition of history straddled, there

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>115</sup>'Sampadaker Nibedan', Aitihasik Chitra, Vol I: 1, January 1899, p. 5.

existed a social group that was broadly classified as leaders and the subordinate groups that had to follow them. The collectors of such historical material were obviously from the educated class. In the process of its collections it would also style itself as the leaders in this cultural revolt. This process of self-styling was a pedagogic process and it was the pedagogy of history that moulded the leader. The self-image such articulations mirrored for itself, was constructed in terms of the moral responsibilities of the bhadralok.

This lesson of history came to be institutionalised in literature written for children. A later children's Reader Charitragathan or 'The Formation of Character', first published in 1901, included a lesson entitled 'Bhadralok', which defined the bhadralok in terms of his ability to control anger, be forgiving, show kindness and humility. The elaboration of these qualities however, had the Rajput as an absent referent:

In former times, a group called 'knights' existed in Europe. Their purpose in life was to vanquish the wicked. They would roam day and night on horseback, outfitted with armour and weapons, ready to save persecuted men and women. They were well-educated, belonged to a respectable class and unmatched in their knowledge of warfare ... However, the knights did not become famous for their heroic feats alone, they also possessed loyalty, courage, strength, knowledge of warfare, respect and love for women and children. Champions of the oppressed they were ever ready to fight the oppressors. They treated the defeated with respect and trusted friends. Truthfulness, righteousness, and purity were all virtues possessed by knights.<sup>116</sup>

Relating the medieval European institution of gallantry to the contemporary context, the article said:

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<sup>116</sup>Gnyanenedra Mohan Das, Charitra-Gathan, 1901, rpt. Allahabad, 1919, p. 57.

At present particular groups of virtuous men, do not exist, however, dutiful, philanthropic and respectable individuals are given the title 'knight'. At this moment, on account of the excellent legislative and judicial measures of the Government, a specific group of gallants are no longer needed to crush the wicked., but if we want to become respectable and genuinely sociable, we must acquire the virtues of the above mentioned group.<sup>117</sup>

The bhadralok, then, were required to display all the virtues of the medieval knights, qualities that his 'predecessors' the Rajputs and Marathas possessed. Thus the multiple and complex levels at which this oppositional cultural history functioned within a colonial context, transformed the warrior into a metaphor for resistance and rendered history-writing into a process by which the past could aid an understanding of the present and prepare the ground for the future. The construction of a culture of resistance by an articulate 'cultured' class out of a varied historical material from the realm of the real as well the fantastic was thus a part of its hegemonising activity as a social group.

It was through the seemingly non-political practice of history-writing, that the middle class spoke on behalf of subordinate classes whose interests it saw itself as protecting. Casting their defining characteristics in the mould of the medieval knights the bhadralok saw themselves as protecting the abused subordinate classes and showed no awareness of their own participation in their exploitation. If this negative aspect of the scheme did not seem clear to them, it was because of the terms in which they framed their oppositional self-image.

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., p. 57.



## Conclusion

The nineteenth-century project of history-writing was elaborated as a response to several aspects of colonial discourse. So the nineteenth-century historiographical project attempted to refute several components of colonial denigration: official historiography, the image of the effete Bengali, the 'Martial Races' theory, the exclusion of Bengalis from higher posts. In framing an oppositional identity through history, the fundamentals of Orientalist discourse were often appropriated. Another significant empowering strategy was the fusion of the mythical and the historical. The heroic content of this discourse was appropriated from Rajput and Maratha legends about resistance to Muslim 'tyranny'. Such a construction of heroism in Hindu cultural terms therefore necessarily excluded the Muslim population in Bengal.

Since colonialism was the immediate context of their articulations, such historical self-descriptions together with the efforts to homogenise a cultural identity in Hindu terms answered the deeply felt need for a self-hood which could be elaborated and generalised to include all Hindus. In this homogenising process gender played an important role. In order to recover heroism in contemporary life the icon of the glorious motherland was often invoked. Gender shaped this emerging Hindu identity as it often framed its self-image in terms of several female icons - the icon of the motherland, the heroic wife and the ideal mother. It is to this process of gendering within the Hindu discourse, that we shall now turn.

### CHAPTER III

#### GENDER AND THE OPPOSITIONAL IDENTITY

As we have seen in Chapters I and II, attempts at organising patterns of exemplary Indian/Hindu/Bengali behaviour coexisted with the rewriting of history in the structuring of organisations as well as in the field of discursive practices. Both these significant components of the reconstructed Hindu identity attempted to frame the oppositional in gender-specific terms. The formative impulses of the nineteenth-century Hindu discourse derived directly from Orientalist appraisal and indirectly from official and missionary denigration of several segments of what was designated the Hindu identity. As many of the social customs that were perceived as barbaric by official and missionary discourses were specifically related to women, legal reform as well as missionary activities were directed at saving the unfortunate victims of barbaric customs. Not surprisingly then, formulations of cultural identity in nineteenth-century Bengal were intricately entwined with questions about gender. Apart from the grand symbol of resistance - the mother land 'greater than heaven itself', concretised in the image of the Bharat Mata ('Mother India') - the domesticated image of the chaste wife also played a significant role in the framing of this identity. This chapter will concentrate on the construction of two specific gender-icons - the wife and the mother - and demonstrate how the emerging Hindu discourse collated the ideals of heroism and the principles of domesticity as it sought to consolidate a Hindu identity for Calcutta's rising middle class.

Conventional views of colonial debates on the 'women's question' in colonial

Bengal, have stressed the unprecedented focus on women's lives during this period.<sup>1</sup> This not only made for an approach which saw the period of reform in early nineteenth-century India, as distinct from the nationalist period, but also drew a path of 'natural' progression from reform to women's emancipation. Earlier scholars like Ghulam Murshid have looked at the demands placed on the bhadramahila to become modern, and her subsequent failure to do so.<sup>2</sup> An offshoot of this line of argument has been the attempt to look at nationalism itself as logically developing out of the period of reform and has resulted in subsequent bewilderment at the fading away of the earlier reformist concern for 'female emancipation' from the agenda of nationalism.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Lata Mani has attempted to demonstrate how the 'concern' articulated for women in debates about sati were actually debates about the nature of 'tradition' for which women were perceived as a suitable site.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Uma Chakravarti has shown that the nineteenth-century construction of a specific kind of

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<sup>1</sup>A representative example of the earlier scholarship on women's issues is B.R. Nanda (ed.), Indian Women : From Purdah to Modernity, New Delhi, 1976.

<sup>2</sup>Ghulam Murshid, Reluctant Debutante : Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation 1849-1905, Rajshahi, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>See for example, Kumari Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, New Delhi, 1986, also Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India, London, 1986. Dagmar Engels has argued that in Bengal, British and Bengali men both took up women's issues when they fitted in with their wider political aims, but turned away when legislative changes clashed with political and patriarchal privileges. See Dagmar Engels, 'The Limits of Gender Ideology: Bengali Women, The Colonial State, and the Private Sphere, 1890-1930', Women's Studies International Forum, 12:4, 1989, pp. 425-37.

<sup>4</sup>Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, 1780-1833', PhD dissertation, University of California, 1989. Publication forthcoming.

past was closely tied to the construction of a particular type of womanhood.<sup>5</sup> This rich body of scholarship has opened up questions about why certain gender-related themes became so important in the nineteenth century.

Continuing with the story of the formation of a particular kind of Hindu identity, this Chapter will concentrate on the ways in which some female figures from a given repertoire of Hindu mythology and legends were recast as receptacles for the ideals of nineteenth century Bengali Hindutva. Moreover, it will also explore the consequent pressures this kind of construction placed on middle-class ideals of Hindu conjugality and motherhood. As in the earlier chapters, the deployment of feminine figures within the emerging discourse of cultural identity, will be looked at in terms of discursive formations rather than the actual lived experiences of women. This is not to privilege the former over the latter but to examine and explore the important role played by discursive constructions of gender within the shaping of a powerful oppositional ideology. Moreover, the analyses of icons of gender and their distinctive resonances within the formulation of cultural identity are especially significant in the context of past debates about the 'women's question', as it points towards an overlap between the reformist concern for the emancipation of real women and the nationalist concern for a mythologised motherland. The characteristic hegemonising aspect of this discourse as demonstrated in Chapters I and II, sought oppositional archetypes that would enable the anchoring of a cultural identity for Calcutta's burgeoning middle

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<sup>5</sup>Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a script for the Past', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 27-87.

class.

Although Chatterjee sees a 'lack of concern' with the women's question within nationalism, the concern for women was never really given up even if it was articulated in different terms. Again, the notion of progress as it was applied to women was an ambiguous one. The complex manner in which the image of the ideal wife and strong mother cohered reveal the way in which the bhadramahila was expected to 'modernise' and at the same time retain the essentials of the Hindutva that was being defined through her. Therefore rather than any 'nationalist resolution of the women's question'<sup>6</sup>, the deployment of gender-icons within nationalism illustrate the limits of nineteenth-century progressive thinking. Moreover, by arguing for a Hindu discourse which guided and shaped gender concerns, I am here attempting to give the women's question a different lineage. For, as we shall see, the gender icons that were deployed by the articulators of this discourse originated in the rationalisation of a selection of available images from a Hindu iconographical repertoire.

As we have noted earlier, the principal discursive constructs as well as the literary genres of colonial Bengal were characterised by a feeling of distress which informed the configuration of contemporary Bengali cultural identity. This distress was an outcome of repeated colonial evaluations of the Bengali male as weak, effeminate, essentially non-martial and incapable of serving in the army or even occupying higher administrative posts. Against such notions, Bengali cultural identity drafted for itself specific icons of heroic resistance. Of these Jasodhara Bagchi has studied in rich detail

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<sup>6</sup>See Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in ibid., pp. 233-53.

the icon of motherhood within nationalist thought, and we shall return to her views later.<sup>7</sup> An equally important segment of this identity was the discussion of the role of the ideal wife. Indeed, the discourse on motherhood was never isolated from the notion of Hindu conjugality during this period. The power and strength of motherhood was the natural result of emulating the ideals of the good wife. As Tanika Sarkar has pointed out, it was a specifically Hindu conjugality that guided articulations about a nationalist self.

the Hindu marriage system as a whole constituted the only remaining site of freedom and of resistance, the concrete location of this system was the physical body of the Hindu women ... The female body ... was still pure and unmarked, loyal and subservient to the rule of the Shastras alone.<sup>8</sup>

It was this concern with purity that designated the ideal Hindu wife as capable of resisting colonial allegations of warped womanhood. Being a good wife made possible the important shift to motherhood. Both these gender-icons were deployed in the shaping of a cultural identity by a hegemonising middle class.

### **Defining the Chaste Woman: The Sati and Resistance**

We have noted in Chapter II, how the imaginative elaboration of actual historical events attempted to define the past in terms of the colonially marked present and

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<sup>7</sup>Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal', Economic and Political Weekly, (Hereafter EPW), 20-27 October, 1990, pp. WS-66-8.

<sup>8</sup>Tanika Sarkar, 'Hindu Conjugality and Nationalism in Late 19th Century Bengal', Indian Women: Myth and Reality, National Seminar Papers, Calcutta, 1989, Paper No. 9, p. 8.

called into existence the notion of a glorious 'Aryan' past. Moreover, mythology was used within indigenous historiography to contest imperialist arguments commonly advanced in nineteenth-century India, to disparage Hindus in general and Hindu women in particular. Kedarnath Datta, in his Bharatbarsher Itihas or 'A History of India', in 1860 sought to refute the colonial misconstruction of Hindu women combatively against what he saw as constituting the permissive life-style of the western woman:

He [Mr Ward] says that European women are quite careful about their chastity even though they move around in public; whereas the Hindu women are notoriously lax about their morality although they apparently shy away from socialising. He has glossed over much indeed! Let me tell our English friend - this is a total travesty of truth. The huge number of Hindu ladies with loose characters mentioned by him may be true but that definitely cannot be compared with the national moral laxity of the English. Whatever the blemish the Hindus may have, they do not indulge in Mask, Ball and Supper. In England, a lot of licentious laxity has taken place on the pretext of such hypocritical socialising. (Underlined words in English in the original).<sup>9</sup>

Compared to the free-mixing of European society, the Hindu woman occupied a space that was consecrated, she was moreover, a custodian of Hindu culture. The strong statements about the promiscuous nature of English women served two important functions for the contemporary Bengali cultural identity: they defended and defined the chastity of 'our' women as opposed to 'their' concepts and 'their' women and at the same time warned against the unquestioning acceptance of European

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<sup>9</sup>Kedar Nath Datta, Bharat Barsher Itihas, Calcutta, 1860. p. 31. In 1890, the Bangabasi differentiated between European and Indian women similarly: 'In your country even a woman having a hundred paramours is counted as chaste, but among our people the chaste woman is worshipped as goddess ... The husband is her god and, when he dies she either ascends the burning funeral pyre or practices a lifelong brahmacharya in the expectation of joining him in the next world.' Bangabasi, 12 December, 1890 in RNP: Bengal, No. 52 of 1890, p. 1158.

misconstructions about Indian life in general.

The history constructed by nineteenth-century Bengalis told of the erudite and learned women of Aryavarta in the distant past. If the resistance symbolised by such depictions of learned women denoted a certain type of heroism, in the more recent past, sati, a practice banned by law in 1829, re-entered the discourse of cultural identity as a metaphor for the heroism women were capable of.

Rajani Kanta Gupta, whose anecdotal history Arya Kirti or the 'Glorious Deeds of the Aryans' we considered in Chapter II, chronicled the heroic feats of the Rajputs. In his perception courage was not specifically a male virtue and women feature prominently in this narrative of Aryan heroism. He narrates the stories of heroic princesses and queens who died bravely fighting the enemies of their husbands. These stories mythicised their historical women protagonists: Sanjukta, Rajbai, Tarabai and Krishnakumari to name a few, and equated them to the mythical Sabitri whose devotion to her husband won over the awesome God of Death. Devotion, undaunted in the face of death, was extolled as a virtue worth emulating. Most of these women exhibited courage not only in battle and physical feats, but quite often became Satis on the death of their husbands.

A typical sample, from the exemplary nature of its contents and the anonymity of the woman protagonist, is the story of the daughter of Beigu, the bir-bala - or the brave young woman. The title itself - 'Birbalar Atma-bisarjan' ('The Self-Sacrifice of a Brave Woman') - insinuates a connection between the spectacle of the sati and the exalted merit of sacrifice. In this story, the heroine's only identity comprises references to the land of her origin, her father and her husband. When her husband,



whom she loves dearly, insults her father, she protests violently, as the author implies befitted the daughter of a courageous father. Finally, her brother challenges her husband to a duel and kills him. The sight of her dead husband reawakens in her old devotion and she decides (as the author approvingly tells us) to commit sati. Typical of contemporary Bengal is the concern for what is considered appropriate and exemplary behaviour rather than the actual events. The dramatic end of this story closely follows Tod's narration of the same story in his Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan. Tod, however, had emphasised the nature of this feudal squabble, and dwelled only momentarily on the act of self-immolation:

The insult to the Meghawuts being avenged, the Pramars were about to retaliate; but seeing the honour of her house thus dearly maintained, affection succeeded to resentment, and the Rajpootni determined to expiate her folly with her life. The funeral pile was erected close to the junction of the Bamuni and Chumbul, and she ascended with the body of her lord, her own father setting fire to it.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, in Rajani Kanta Gupta's version, the relationship between the brave daughter of Beigu and the heroic Pramari is carefully elaborated. This nineteenth-century gloss aided in establishing the importance of conjugal compatibility within the heroic narrative. Moreover, the details of bloodshed and the ensuing transformation of the heart of the wife of Pramari which leads to her terrifying decision typically represents the nineteenth century fascination with a past spectacle that could concurrently affirm heroism, honour and conjugal compatibility:

The blood streaming out of her dead husband washed away all signs of

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<sup>10</sup>James Tod, Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan Vol. II, 1832, London, rpt. 1914, p.

hostility and anger from the courageous wife of Prammar. In her composed mind that old devotion and love for her husband were kindled again. The dauntless lady firmly resolved to die with her husband. The Rajput woman happily lay down beside her dead husband. The king of Beigu, [her father] lit that pyre.<sup>11</sup>

The narrative stance taken by the author implies that these women did not need to be defined in any way other than their patrilineal descent and their exemplary behaviour consisted of dying with the one and only husband with whom conjugal compatibility was possible. In this particular context the daughter of Beigu also atoned for recklessly overstepping the limits of the paradigm by confronting her husband. Her decision to die with her husband is described as a sacrifice and carries with it a specific descriptive resonance. The courage she displayed in her uncompromising decision to commit sati, finally equates her with divine powers - as the sati was supposed to be a holy figure.

This fascination with the spectacle of sati did not remain confined to such mythologised historical constructs. In the theatre, this spectacle, conflating sati and johar (the Rajput custom of collective death by fire of women and children when defeat was certain) was fairly popular. Binodini Dasi, one of the leading actresses of the day, to whom we shall return later, recounts in her autobiography the success of Jyotirindranath Tagore's play Sarojini. Binodini describes the impact of the song composed by the young Rabindranath, which was included in this play. The song - 'Jval, Jval Chita' - 'Burn, burn, O Pyre' - had an electrifying effect on the actresses as well the audience:

In the play, Sarojini, there is a scene where the Rajput women are singing as

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<sup>11</sup>Rajani Kanta Gupta, Arya Kirti, Calcutta, 1886, p. 249.

they ascend the funeral pyre. This scene would thrill the audience ... A group of Rajput women, dressed in red saris, some in floral ornaments, some with garlands, singing - 'Jval Jval Chita ...' would circle round the pyre and fall into the fire. At the same time, kerosene was sprayed into the fire, and it would flare up. Although some singed their hair, others' clothes caught fire, nobody cared - they still came round and jumped in. I cannot write down the excitement that would grip us at that time.<sup>12</sup>

This portrayal of sati, suggests a reinterpretation at work - a re-reading of practices elsewhere designated 'barbaric' in terms of heroic resistance. However, even as the discourse clarified what was meant by the heroism of the Hindu women, it oscillated between outright condemnation of a despicable act and what it perceived as its heroic sub-text.<sup>13</sup> The Bamabodhini Patrika, a journal instituted for women by male reformers, often reported in its columns instances where sati had been thwarted. But the fascination with the act of self-immolation and its associated merits are recounted in an anonymous article on 'Heroic Women' which appeared in 1875.

Who will deny that Indian women have long gained the ability to be heroic in the religious sphere? They have comprehended purity to be their ultimate religious aim and to what extent have they not been prepared to sacrifice a great deal for this ideal! To ascend the funeral pyre of a dead husband in the living body - the thought itself makes us tremble, yet millions of Indian women have borne this ordeal with smiling faces.<sup>14</sup>

However, the narrative is suddenly arrested in this fascination with the act of sati and rebounds into a comparison with the equally harsh actuality of widowhood: 'Living the

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<sup>12</sup>Binodini Dasi, 'Amar Abhinetri Jiban' in Amar Katha O Anyanya Rachana, 1912 rpt., Calcutta, 1987, pp. 102 .

<sup>13</sup>Later in 1891, Mahendranath Vidyanidhi referred to satidaha or widow-burning as 'the preeminent example of the matchless grandeur of Hindu Womanhood.' Mahendranath Vidyanidhi, 'Sahamaran', Janmabhumi, IV:3, February 1891, p. 182.

<sup>14</sup>Anon., 'Birangana' or 'Brave Women' in Bamabodhini, XI:141, 1875. p. 4.

life of a celibate after the death of the husband is an equally tough matter'.<sup>15</sup>

That such an equation was a fairly common construct during the 1870s is supported by similar articles in the influential Banga Darshan, edited by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay until 1876 and from 1877 onwards by his brother Sanjib Chandra. An anonymous article entitled 'Satidaha' ('Widow burning') appeared in 1877 with an ambiguous editorial comment, which while pointing out that the opinions expressed in the article are the author's personal opinion, nevertheless asserted that the inclusion of such 'independent' critical opinion was essential for the refinement of literary taste. The article itself concentrated on the plight of the living sati - the widow: 'In the past, they would 'burn in a day, now they burn every day. Then they could burn themselves to death - even now they burn, but they can no longer die.'<sup>16</sup>

When thus juxtaposed with the widow, the sati apparently escaped the terrible realities of widowhood. Moreover the notion of sacrifice for a greater cause, as illustrated in the forging of an oppositional history, transformed the self-immolation of the sati into a heroic sacrifice. The parallel between the ascetic widow and the sati thus aided in domesticating and containing the brutality of sati within the congenial receptacle of pativratya - the devotion of the wife - a devotion that was seen to endure even after the death of the husband. Heroic and mythical womanhood thus became recast in the form of good devoted wives mainly in the icon of the mythical Sabitri. Once again, as in the historical narrative, the use of the mythical empowered a retreat

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>Anon., 'Sati Dahan' or 'Widow Immolation', in Banga Darshan, V:3, 1877. p. 107.

from the present and simultaneously afforded the interpellation of the prescriptive norms of nineteenth-century conjugality into what was recharacterised as an 'ageless' and 'unchanged' legend. Thus the meaning of the term sati was conflated to include sacrifice and devotion within a feminine icon that was deployed to resist colonial notions of a 'barbaric' Hindu tradition.

Apart from these the term itself also included a reference to an aspect of the goddess Durga - Sati - the daughter of the mythical Daksha, who finding her father's insult to her husband unbearable had given up the mortal body. Both these mythical figures were perceived in the contemporary reinterpretation of religious forms as embodying a valid meaning of the term sati - in what was described as its wider meaning, and therefore disconnected from the prohibited act. Seeking once more its legitimacy from the mythical world, the notion of heroism and conjugality came together in the framing of the notion of satitva - a term conflating devotion and purity as the primary marker for ideal Hindu compatibility.

### **Domesticity and the Refashioned Sati-sadhvi**

In the ideal of Sabitri, immortalised in numerous nineteenth-century tracts and plays is revealed an anxiety to fuse the innate heroic resistance contained in this exemplary figure with the ideals of domesticity. An article entitled 'Sati-tej' or the 'Power of Feminine Virtue' which appeared in 1886 in Prachar, a journal instituted by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, perceived in Sabitri's defiance of Yama the potential to restore order in chaos. It exhorted its male readers:

You should all learn to worship Sabitri, the great sati, only then will your women become mighty, imbued with the sati-power; and so shall you understand the true meaning of dharma. To my understanding it is only in the house of a Satyaban that a Sabitri appears. O Men, if you become Satyaban, then you would certainly see Sabitri the Sati, at your side.<sup>17</sup>

What this article characteristically emphasised is the complementary role of the sahadharmini - one who shares in the same dharma. Mythological figures such as Sabitri seem equipped with enough power or tej to overcome her fated widowhood and continue her life as sahadharmini. Chandranath Basu, a prominent Bengali litterateur, writing Sabitri-Tattva, at the turn of the century, commenting on the ideal that Sabitri held up before Hindu women said:

Sabitri is a wonderfully sympathetic creation of the poet ... For a Hindu woman, nothing equals the threat, and pain and the scorching signalled in the state of widowhood. Having marked in the Shastras the byabastha of eternal widowhood for the well-being and preservation of society, religion, this life and the next, the writer of the Shastras felt anguish. His heart was touched like a woman. Therefore he placed Sabitri before the women of India, saying: Become like her, vow to meet this ideal and you shall be fortunate in your husbands. Even if you lose your husband in this life, you shall never lose him in the next, so the pitiful state of widowhood will never be your lot to suffer.<sup>18</sup>

By establishing the notion of a marriage that lasted beyond death, by moving it beyond temporality, the discourse on satitva negotiated the dismay caused by the introduction of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 - a dismay from which some of the articulators of the contemporary Hindu discourse never recovered despite their sympathy for the plight of widows. However, within the conflictual conjugal space

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<sup>17</sup>Anonymous, 'Sati-tej' or 'The Power of the Chaste Woman', Prachar, Vol III, 1886, p. 114.

<sup>18</sup>Chandranath Basu, Sabitri-Tattva, Calcutta, 1900, p. 210.

how was Sabitri to be reincarnated? The Western educated Bengali male, faced with 'social ostracism and isolation' sought a 'limited and controlled emancipation of wives' as a means of 'survival in a hostile social world'.<sup>19</sup> Compatibility, which was demonstrated as a guiding presence in the mythological and legendary world, was now sought in the affective space of the home. An article in the Bamabodhini Patrika entitled 'The Behaviour of the Bengali Wife towards her Husband' which appeared in 1873, pointed out the sharp divide between husband and wife in their reading habits and interests. While the husband delighted in Shakespeare and Milton, books are deemed poison by the wife, and while the husband is concerned about current affairs in England and India, the parameters of the wife's concern are confined to the dress and culinary matters of her neighbours. The fitting sahadharmini of a leader in the contemporary cultural revolt, had to extend her knowledge if she was to be given a place at his side. In this the Hindu notion of sahadharmini accommodated Victorian norms of marriage. Therefore, the article concluded that women also had to learn to stretch the limits of their generosity in order to understand their husbands fully.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the prescription of education, the bhadramahila had to be deeply rooted in tradition. Social reform in colonial India from the abolition of sati in 1829 to the Age of Consent Act of 1891 focussed on the redefinition of women's place within

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<sup>19</sup> Sumit Sarkar, 'The "Women's Question" in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Women and Culture, Bombay, 1985, p. 161.

<sup>20</sup> Bamabodhini Patrika, VIII:117, April-May 1873, pp. 16-18.

'true' tradition.<sup>21</sup> This continuous preoccupation with the prescriptive norms of tradition often came into conflict with the avowed aims of female education as is clear from contemporary debates that centred around the Rukhmabai case of 1885. Married in 1875, Rukhmabai had passed her matriculation examination and had decided to return to her father's house when her in-laws expressed hostility towards her educational accomplishment.<sup>22</sup> Seeing in Rukhmabai's refusal to return to her husband an arrogance that originated in Western education, an article in Prachar asked her to beg forgiveness of her husband, for only after she had appeased the gods and her husband could she hope to be reborn, as the article implied, a fortunate Hindu woman in her next life.<sup>23</sup> This deeply-felt anxiety about female education was so often reiterated by male articulators of the emerging discourse of cultural identity, that it crept into autobiographies and other forms of personal narratives. While female education was often deemed the root of undesirable arrogance in the woman, a major component of the nineteenth-century Hindu discourse was the fashioning of an identity for the sahadharmini. As an illustration of this, I shall briefly turn to the unpublished diary of Hemendra Prasad Ghose, a member of the Indian National Congress, litterateur and editor of Basumati.

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<sup>21</sup>Approaching this from a different angle, Mrinalini Sinha has argued that the Victorian ideal of 'manliness' featured prominently in the policy debates which legislation such as the Age of Consent Act of 1891 provoked. See Mrinalini Sinha, 'Manliness: A Victorian Ideal & Colonial Policy in late Nineteenth Century Bengal', Ph.D dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1988.

<sup>22</sup>For a brief discussion of this case see Dagmar Engels, 'The Limits of Gender Ideology', pp. 428-29.

<sup>23</sup>Surendranath Mukhopadhyay, 'Rukmabai', Prachar, Vol III, 1886, pp. 390-99.



### Fashioning the Sahadharmini: Hemendra Prasad's Diaries.

How was the ideal Hindu wife to be modelled into a fit companion of her husband? Far from recommending any radical 'modernisation', what was recommended was a 'harmonious' blending of Western education and Hindu spirituality. The dichotomy set up by scholars like Murshid gives us an incorrect understanding of the bhadramahila's position. Far from a failure to respond to the modernisation sought by her husband, the bhadramahila had to negotiate both worlds, as we shall see. Moreover, the demand for modernisation was never total as disparaging remarks about the modernised bibi who imitates the mem are fairly common. The stress seemed to be on fashioning a Hindu woman who could transcend the narrowness of her traditional role and comprehend the outer world. Therefore, it is not surprising to encounter this attempt at accommodation even in private and intimate revelations about the nature of a nineteenth-century Bengali marriage. More importantly, the diary of Hemendra Prasad Ghose aids in our understanding of the several levels of expectations that were at play within conjugality.

In his unpublished diaries,<sup>24</sup> Hemendra Prasad perceives the coexistence of marriage and romantic love as unimaginable. In an entry dated 12 June, 1894, he refers to his poem published in the Bengalee called Unexpressed Love; the entry for

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<sup>24</sup>The reference here is to Hemendra Prasad's unpublished diaries 1893-1901 written in English and housed at the Central Library of Jadavpur University, Calcutta and hereafter cited as UDHPG. Selections from the diaries of January 1889 - November 1891, edited by Pratul Gupta, were published in Bengal: Past and Present, Nos. 194-201, 1983-1986. See Bibliography.

the following day states: 'The old question of my marriage vexes me again.'<sup>25</sup> More strongly stated is the entry on the eve of his marriage: 'I think that I hear my scaffold rising on which a life - the past life is to be shaken off for ever.'<sup>26</sup> While this might be understood simply as a characteristic response of a contented bachelor, a more complicated picture appears particularly when one looks at his reactions to widow remarriage and women's education. In the context of a conversation with a friend on the subject of widow remarriage, he says:

Consciously or unconsciously we are imbibing Western ideas and like Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt we are fast becoming a bundle of Western ideas ... In India we want Female Education. But in the Western countries they are tired of the power they have vested in the hands of their women. Perhaps we are the last set who shall enjoy the remaining drop of the nectar of ancient civilization. Our women ... are in their ignorance a bliss, in their superstitions so many jewels, in their devotedness and kindness so many ministering angels ... we do not think Widow remarriage is a sin. A change is now being brought in the social atmosphere. And we know not what is in the womb of the future.<sup>27</sup>

Two years later, the glimmer of change reveals itself in the initiative of the Hindoo College in admitting women. Hemendra Prasad, an ex-student writes with pride - 'I consider it a privilege to belong to a College which has the moral courage to defy the remarks of those who consider the cultivation of the woman's mind an unnecessary luxury.' One of the causes for his approval is that men will no longer suffer their ignorant wives, for it will 'lessen the burden of life and illumine the aspect

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<sup>25</sup>UDHPG, June 14, 1894.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 7 March, 1895.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 10 February, 1895.

of our hearths and homes'.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that this particular entry belongs to the period after his marriage and confirms Sumit Sarkar's suggestion that the limited but controlled emancipation of wives undertaken by the early generation of the Western educated males was in fact 'a personal necessity for survival in a hostile social world'.<sup>29</sup> Nor was Hemendra Prasad's an isolated concern, the twenty-year old Hemendra Prasad shared this problem with the earlier generation of urban Bengalis.<sup>30</sup> Hemendra Prasad's wife, Manorama was a girl of thirteen, and the burden of responsibility felt by the twenty-year old husband was immense. In contemporary discussions about marital compatibility the young age of the woman was seen an essential factor: it was easier to mould a young girls than older women.

I shudder as I look before me and probe into the stupendous task - the task of forming a character - the task of making another my own, the task of making another human being my partner in life ... the stupendous task that lies before me.<sup>31</sup>

The notion of moulding character, becomes quite central to Hemendra Prasad's search for a meaningful relationship. Often taking an imaginary reader into confidence he confessed that he was actually engaged in the study of his wife as a 'character'.

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 5 July, 1897.

<sup>29</sup>Sumit Sarkar, 'The Women's Question' p. 161.

<sup>30</sup>Manomohan Basu, one of the active participants of the Hindu Mela expressed a similar problem in his diary. Aged fifty-seven, he disclosed his anguish at the inability of the women-folk to understand history or share the husband's intellectual pursuits: 'I have not been able to dicuss several historical items because it would prove beyond their understanding - Oh! when will our women companions show competence and increase the happiness of their male partners thousand-fold!' Sunil Das (ed.), Manomohan Basur Aprakashita Diary, ('The Unpublished Diary of Manomohan Basu', entry for 26 January 1887, Calcutta, 1981, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup>UDHPG, 14 March, 1895.

These addresses to the imaginary reader remain consistent throughout the diaries. Hemendra Prasad's inclusion of a 'reader' whose 'presence' is that of a sympathizer is indicative of the process of negotiation at work within the private realm. 'Love', which formed the core of Hemendra Prasad's dilemma, was understood to be 'a complex affair. It wants all the attention of the lover. But the lover-student cannot do that ... He must at times suppress his feelings of love and praise to study the woman'.<sup>32</sup> So the business of studying the character called Manorama, who happened to be his wife, was conducted in the 'presence' of an imaginary reader. It is interesting to note here that Hemendra Prasad does not mention any other woman, except a passing reference to his sister-in-law.

Hemendra Prasad, also subscribed to the notion of male agency in the creation of female characters, in life and in literature. For he says, 'It is the man who is responsible for her actions'.<sup>33</sup> To create their own equals in a marriage was to become the burden of the husband. The rest of this particular entry reads like a manual for the reluctantly-wed, to enable his progress on the tricky path of love. Hemendra Prasad had devised a unique method of testing his wife:

The student must see all sides. The simplest plan will be to ask a few questions say 3 or 4 on so many different subjects. Ask these questions today and ask them (in a round about way) say a week hence - and mark the change in the answers soon and you shall find what marvellous changes take place in a woman within a very short time.

The task is difficult and I cannot advise each and all to do the same.

Having indicated that, Hemendra Prasad gives his 'reader' some indication as

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 1 January, 1896.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 1 January, 1896.

to the length of time involved, before one can dutifully love one's wife. For love remains one of a most important duties of the husband, as another entry dated 30 July 1895 indicated. But to return to the earlier entry, Hemendra Prasad provided a step-by-step description of the progress one can expect in a similar situation:

During the first month after her marriage the wife will feel ashamed to put off the veil before her husband.

During the second she will do so.

During the third she will harbour a longing to see him.

During the fourth she will try to be with him always.

During the fifth she will feel the pain of separation keenly.

During the sixth she will not like to leave him.

During the seventh she will be a devoted friend in addition to what she was before.

During the eighth the same process will go on.

During the ninth if she will go away a few inches away from her husband in her sleep, waking she will watch if he is awake and if she thinks he is asleep, she will come to him and may even kiss him.

During the first two months she will feel ashamed when kissed. But then she will consider it a misfortune to be left without kisses.

Such are the changes which the short period of a few months will work upon the (poor) young woman.<sup>34</sup>

The detachment which is notable, as also the direct form of address to the 'reader', reveals the pressures that accompanied the merging of the public and the private areas of life.<sup>35</sup> As a western-educated youth who was beginning to enjoy a certain standing in the literary society of Calcutta, Hemendra Prasad was acutely conscious of the disparity between the imagined ideal and the pain of the real.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., same entry.

<sup>35</sup>Shibnath Shastri for example, in his autobiography Atmacharit, expressed his very private dilemma concerning his second wife. A leading Brahmo reformer, severely critical of the Kulin system of polygamy, Shibnath was married to her as a child, and was unable to disown her when she came of age. In consultation with his first wife he decided to educate her and later get her married. His plans fell through when she refused to be a part of this strange scheme.

Hemendra Prasad, perhaps like many of his contemporaries, often accounted for the fact that there was something wrong in the state of conjugal relations, in terms of the changes brought about by colonialism. He lamented that 'we who have come during the transition period of India, ours is a hard time. Those who came before us had a comparatively better time ... But think of us - the difference between our ideal and the real in almost all matters - Education, home, wife all'.<sup>36</sup> In this nostalgia, the related yearning for the glorified ancient past expressed itself in another guise - this time harking back to an earlier period where conjugal compatibility came naturally. The inter-twining of personal strands of narrative with the prevalent notions about the past golden age followed from an intense self-consciousness about a personal failure to fashion the immediate contents of reality - contents that were necessarily shaped by colonial intervention. Earnestly aware of his own limitations, Hemendra Prasad claimed to be duty-bound to love his wife and the only comment which revealed how much he valued her is recorded on 9 January 1896: 'To me she is of more importance than the whole British Empire'<sup>37</sup> - thus collating the private and the public worlds and placing the empire on a emblematic scale of values.

Even as Hemendra Prasad wrote of his anxieties, the reconstructed Hindu discourse was beginning to draw women into an active participation into its hegemonic project of forging a 'new' cultural identity. Middle-class Hindu women who wrote in the journals of late nineteenth century Bengal, drew on the

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 7 July, 1896.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 9 January, 1896.

reconstructions of their pre-history in Aryan womanhood, and negotiated for themselves a position of strength.

### **The Sati-Sabitri Myth and Middle-class Women**

The myth of Sabitri, then, was reconstructed within the domestic space and middle-class women writing on this theme found in this the self-assurance they needed to search out a positive identity that other circumstances in their lives denied. Prasannamayi Debi, writing a travelogue entitled Aryavarta, thus addressed her daughter in the Dedication: 'bear in mind, this land where Sita, Sabitri, Damayanti, Draupadi etc., were born is also the land of your birth - so try to mould yourself according to their ideals - as a proper Hindu woman',<sup>38</sup>

Women who engaged in the discursive formulations of Bengali cultural identity negotiated the mythological as confirmation of their power. Furthermore, it often became a means of framing an oppositional womanhood against colonial designations of weakness and derelict sexuality. As Susie Tharu has pointed out in the case of Indo-Anglian poets like Toru Dutt, Savitri represented essential Indian womanhood: 'For the Victorians, women like the Indians, were really children. Only, white women were not 'half-devil, half-child' like the Orientals were, but 'half-angel, half-child'. And Savitri, the real uncorrupted Indian woman is like her white counterpart, 'child-

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<sup>38</sup>Prasannamayi Debi, Aryavarta, Calcutta, 1888. Dedication.

like' and angelic'.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the image of the chaste Savitri became an emblem for that purity which colonial discourse had denied Hindu society.

A similar insistence is seen in essays by women published by the Hare Prize Fund. In the Hare Prize essays, instituted in 1872 'for the preparation of standard works in the Bengali language calculated to elevate the female minds', the theme of the sati reappeared in its domesticated incarnation. In an essay entitled 'Prakrita Sati Narir Jiban Kirup?', Krishnakamini Debi says: 'The woman who is a sati, shows respect to her parents and all elders, is devoted to her husband, loving towards her children and treats her servants with kindness'.<sup>40</sup>

Thus the exemplary sati-sabitri and her devotion to her husband and his family sought to portray the problem of adjustment within a changing nineteenth-century household - where the wife was required to control and command the servants while treating them with kindness. Krishnakamini Debi goes on to present other aspects of the nineteenth-century sati which, among other things prescribed a combination of thrift with expertise in housework.<sup>41</sup> The Victorian ideal of femininity inevitably inflected this discourse about the ideal wife.<sup>42</sup> However, women's efforts in

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<sup>39</sup>Susie Tharu, 'Tracing Savitri's Cross-Cultural Ancestry Or the Origins in Victorian Racism of the Image of Women in Indo-Anglian Literature', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Women and Culture, p. 283.

<sup>40</sup> Krishnakamini Debi, 'Prakrita Sati Narir Jiban Kirup?' ('What is the Life of a Genuine Chaste Woman like?') in Bama Rachanabali: or, Female Compositions, Hare Prize Fund Essay, Calcutta, 1872. pp. 124-5.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> See Himani Bannerji, 'Textile Prison: Discourse on Shame(lajja) in the Attire of the Gentlewoman (bhadramahila) in Colonial Bengal'. Forthcoming South Asia Research, 12:2, 1992.



recommending learning as well as improvement in demeanour were also part of the attempt to reclaim and restore the very space which such ideological statements had assumed the existence of. The yearning for self-improvement - to render oneself a desirable companion for the husband - was part of the nineteenth-century anxiety about the need to reform the recalcitrant Babu. Numerous farces written during this period articulate this anxiety about the vices of the Babus who wasted their evenings at brothels with prostitutes - women who were generally excluded from this discourse about satitva. When they did enter the discourse, they entered as exceptional examples of remarkable and astonishing virtue.

### **Actresses, Prostitutes and The Process of Marginalisation**

Middle-class anxiety to safeguard respectable women from the fallen women through the numerous requests to the Government to separate the quarters of ill-repute from the bhadralok quarters, naturally tended to marginalise the lives of these 'unfortunate sisters'. However, an exception was made whenever they exhibited some extraordinary merit through the love they bore for their children or their motherland. The ways in which the Hindu discourse operated, significantly demonstrates the process of moral coercion that sought to centralise those that existed in the margins, only when they illustrated a virtue deemed exemplary.

Journals like the Arya Darshan noted with disapproval Lord Lytton's visit to the theatre to watch Sakuntala, in 1877, seeing in it the official encouragement of a reprehensible vice. The theatre was categorised as immoral on account of the

prostitutes who enacted the female roles. The 'historical' arguments for the enlisting of prostitutes in these entertaining arts, were stated in relation to the freedom enjoyed by Aryan women in ancient times:

At this point in time, many will openly acknowledge that the Hindu women of ancient times were considerably more independent. The question then arises as to why were prostitutes recruited as actresses, despite the presence of free, respectable women? ...The reason why prostitutes were ... assigned these roles was that their particular life-style consisted solely of enticing the hearts of others ... so they were seen as more capable of entertaining the audiences at the theatre.<sup>43</sup>

What was codified behind such scenes of vice was the conceptualisation of what was appropriate for the Hindu respectable woman. The pressures of exclusion, which disallowed any references to prostitutes except when by exhibiting exceptional virtues they re-entered the portals of this discourse, aided in reinforcing the prescriptive dimensions, and pointing out their implications for the bhadramahila.<sup>44</sup>

The inclusion of the socially-ostracised prostitutes for the specific purpose of illustrating commendable action remained a component of this discourse up to the nationalist Swadeshi movement, when it was transformed into a typology of the

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<sup>43</sup>'Rangalaye Barangana', 'The Prostitutes at the Theatre', Arya-Darshan, Aug-Sept 1877, p. 227.

<sup>44</sup> Sumanta Banerjee in the essay referred to above, discusses the reactions of the bhadralok intellectuals to the literary efforts of such 'public women'. He aptly points out that '...the acquirement of and the proficiency in the new literary forms was not necessarily a passport for entry into the society of the bhadramahila. The bhadralok insistence on membership of the andarmahal, on the total dependence of the woman on the male head of the family, on strict adherence to the traditional responsibilities of a respectable home, was an important pre-condition for a woman's literary apprenticeship.' Sumanta Banerjee, 'Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women, pp. 164-5.

'whore with a golden heart', which lies beyond the present scope of this thesis.<sup>45</sup>

Whenever the marginalised served the nationalist cause, they entered the arena of this discourse. In 1904, the Antahpur, which advertised itself as an 'illustrated monthly journal in Bengali, edited and contributed to by ladies only' expressed its admiration for Japanese prostitutes in Calcutta during the war between Japan and Russia. Feeding into the general admiration for the Japanese who had successfully challenged Western invincibility, the article noted that no matter where the Japanese are stationed, they have always shown a remarkable patriotism in donating generously for the defence of the motherland, in fact 'even the Japanese prostitutes who live in Calcutta have contributed a few thousand rupees towards such funds in their motherland.'<sup>46</sup> The significance of such a formulation lies in the choice of praiseworthy acts culled from unexpected quarters.

From the meagre evidence available, it becomes impossible to estimate the ways in which the emerging nineteenth-century Hindu discourse impinged upon the actual lives of the prostitutes themselves. We know from Amar Katha - the autobiography of Binodini, a prostitute turned actress that she was drawn into this network of ideas about Hindu notions of a woman's position in society through the agency of her mentor - the playwright and actor, Girish Chunder Ghosh. We have

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<sup>45</sup>A typical example is Bhupendranath Rakshit Ray's story 'Kashthi Pathar' or 'Philosopher's Stone', in Chalar Pathe, Calcutta, 1930, pp. 75-98. Incidentally, Bhupendranath was a part of the Bengal Volunteers in 1929. In the story a 'good prostitute' shelters the freedom-fighter hero, while his sister married to an anglicised barrister is afraid even to acknowledge him. This is just one example of this typology which established itself in popular stories about Swadeshi terrorism.

<sup>46</sup> 'Japan', Antahpur, VII:1, May 1904, p. 13.

considered earlier, Binodini's account of the heroic enactment of a scene from Jyotirindranath Tagore's Sarojini. If the performance of remembered heroism had drawn her into the core themes of the Hindu discourse, the same discourse also positioned her at its margins for being a prostitute and an actress. Girish Chunder, actor, playwright and director was instrumental in introducing Binodini to Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who came to watch her perform Chaitanya-Lila in 1884, and event seen by hagiographers as demonstrating the Paramahansa's breadth of vision. In Binodini's memory, this precious event is recounted in similar terms. She recalls the cleansing effect it had on her:

He would place both his hands on my head thus purging my sinful body and making it pure, and saying: 'Mother, may you gain consciousness!' How kind was his gaze on one so fallen - the very personification of beatitude, gentleness and forgiveness ... So many times have I had the opportunity, in the theatre, of listening to his principal disciple, Narendranath ( who later became known as Swami Vivekananda ) singing the auspicious song - 'Satyam Sivam'. And I have considered this body that has worked in the theatre to be blessed.<sup>47</sup>

In Binodini's description is revealed the power of the discourse which was convinced of its own purging effect over those it had placed at its margins. Ramakrishna's 'universal' acceptance of all God's creatures recombined with other factors to function as a recognition of commendable virtues that can reside even in a corrupt body.

Prostitutes were generally perceived as corrupting the pure social body of the Hindus. By a characteristic 'invention of tradition'<sup>48</sup>, visits to brothels coincided with

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<sup>47</sup>Binodini Dasi, Amar Katha, pp. 50-1.

<sup>48</sup>Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge, 1983. While the essays look at the British invention of tradition in the colonial context, I am

being Western-educated and uprooted from 'true' tradition. In Michael Madhusudan Datta's farce Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata? ('Is this Civilisation?') written in 1860, the meetings of a group of Western-educated youth take place in a brothel. In Hirak Anguriyak (The Diamond Ring), a farce by Kshetrapal Chakrabartty, a founder member of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishat; Ramdas, a corrupt zamindar is shocked to find his son in the brothel that he himself is visiting. Dwarik, an acquaintance points out that the fault was his, as the son had only followed in his father's footsteps.

Ramdas: How is it my fault? Had I asked him to come here? I even had him married off early.

Dwarik: Your late father also had you married off early, yet despite having your wife, you have continued to entertain in this manner in your own home, so should your son become spoilt or mine?<sup>49</sup>

Taking up the same theme of vice amongst the 'new' Babus, Michael Madhusudan Datta's play, ended significantly with Harakamini the wife of the degenerate Naba Babu - the prototype of the vice-ridden western educated Bengali, lamenting her fate: 'Oh! There are innumerable unfortunate women in Calcutta these days who suffer such a painful fate like myself'.<sup>50</sup>

The responsibility of the wife in nineteenth century terms was not only to become the 'recast' woman but also to provide appropriate companionship and check her husband's periodic absences. The recommended alteration that was solicited from the bhadramahila placed her at a point where her interests intersected with the interests

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applying the term to an indigenous counterpart of that mechanism.

<sup>49</sup>Kshetrapal Chakrabartty, Hirak Anguriyak, ('The Diamond Ring'), Calcutta, 1875, p. 32.

<sup>50</sup>Michael Madhusudan Datta, Ekei Ki Bole Sabhyata?, 1860 rpt. Kshetra Gupta (ed.), Madhusudan Granthabali, Calcutta, 1965, p. 254.

of the prostitutes. An article in the Antahpur in 1904, on 'The Inner Quarters of the Hindus', attempted to introduce music - a part of the requisite skill of a prostitute - within the refined arena of Hindu conjugality. The author claimed that many educated young men visited the houses of ill-repute only to listen to music: 'Were they able to get this same pleasure in their own homes, from their loving wives, they would not have had to darken their character ... The day this auspicious rule is introduced in the inner quarters of the Hindus, from that day many young men would give up straying into this sinful path and light the lamp of peace in their homes.'<sup>51</sup> The fact that this particular piece was written by a woman confirms the anxiety that accompanied formulations on conjugality. The threatened conjugal space in order to be reclaimed, required the bhadramahila to refashion her identity. In her 'recast' manifestation not only would she exercise command over her husband but would more effectively establish hegemonic control over subordinate sections of society. What lurked behind women's increasing interest in reorganising domesticity as a discursive norm, was the desire to exercise authority over the husband keeping him away from the 'low' company which threatened to destroy the 'new', refined conjugality. As the Bamabodhini article put it: 'Who can curb a man from his own sinful indulgences, when he does not realise that he has become an evil drunkard incapable of reforming himself? The wife who auspiciously adorns the home.'<sup>52</sup> Informed by the Victorian

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<sup>51</sup>Nagendrabala Debi, 'Hindur Antahpur', 'The Inner Quarters of the Hindus', in Antahpur, November 1904, p. 151.

<sup>52</sup>Anon., 'Striganer Dharmahin Shiksha Samuchit Kina?', ('Is an Education without Religion appropriate for Women?'), Bamabodhini Patrika, VIII:116, 1873, p. 4.

ideal of compatibility, it thus clarified the implications of becoming the 'new' sati - compatible and capable of correcting waywardness.

The act of burning the widow after the death of the husband banned almost fifty years earlier became endowed with a heroic content in the 1870s. As we have seen in Chapter II the historical discourse enabled this particular shift in meaning to take place. Simultaneously the notion became fused with the older notion of the sati-saddhvi - the virtuous and chaste woman/wife. In its domesticated and contained version, the sati returned as a theme in women's writings as a hegemonic construct as well as an expression of anxiety about an imperilled conjugality. Sati with its heroic connotations, as well as in its domesticated form, however was only a stage in the evolution of women to a higher level. The process of fashioning the ideal woman as an accomplished and devoted wife was seen as indicating her progression to the more elevated sphere of motherhood. The ideal wife, wrote the author of an article of that title in the Bamabodhini Patrika in 1891, is one who respects the husband's parents and is virtuous, 'for it is this sort of good wife who makes the best mother.'<sup>53</sup> In the following section, we shall look at the significance of motherhood within this discourse of cultural identity.

### **Divinity, Motherhood and Cultural Identity**

A major preoccupation of the articulators of the nineteenth century Hindu cultural

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<sup>53</sup>'Adarsha Bharya', ('Ideal Wife'), Bamabodhini Patrika, VIII:100, Dec-Jan 1871, p. 249.

identity was motherhood and its descriptive resonance. Drawing from available religious symbols the emerging discourse styled its own symbol of resistance in the image of a motherland 'greater than heaven itself'. Within this reconstructed ambience, middle-class Bengali males - the self-fashioned leaders of a cultural revolt against the colonisers - perceived themselves to be the devoted sons of their dear motherland. Their perceptions were concretised in the icon of the Bharat Mata ('Mother India'), which came to acquire multiple accretions of meaning. Bagchi's 'Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal' traces the 'investiture' of motherhood in Bengal, which had 'its roots in popular religious practice' and in the nineteenth century came to acquire a political meaning. She convincingly explains that what lay at the heart of the matter was a 'distinct male anxiety in the glorification of motherhood - the need for authentication and valour in the face of a better organised cultural order of the rulers.' However, while this preoccupation with motherhood empowered, ideationally at least, its male articulators, Bagchi tells us that this granted 'legitimacy not to the daughters but to the sons of the mother'.<sup>54</sup> This chapter explores in additional detail what this particular nationalist concern with motherhood concealed. A study of Queen Victoria as she is located within the nationalist concern, facilitates an understanding of the masking. While Bagchi dismisses 'loyalists songs sung to mother Victoria in the pleading style of Ramprasad' as they do not seem to be 'marked by the interlocking crises of power

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<sup>54</sup>Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Representing Nationalism', p. WS-71.



and resistance that marks the nationalist use of the icon' <sup>55</sup>; Tanika Sarkar in an earlier article, explains the evolution of the iconography of the Bharat Mata in terms of a shift which occurred when 'literature transposed the language addressed to this remote, foreign mother to Mother India, a mother more authentic, more giving, and very close to the Indian child.'<sup>56</sup> To ignore the significant space granted to the empress by early nationalists is to ignore an important dimension of the discourse on motherhood.

Very little scholarly attention has been focused on the fact that this obsessive nationalist concern with motherhood, enabled the incorporation of Queen Victoria. The inclusion of the empress though seemingly the antithesis of all nationalism stood for further illustrates the operation of hegemony within a self-descriptive discourse articulated within colonial parameters. I shall argue that the inclusion of the empress within the broader framework of nationalism and motherhood, aids our understanding of the dislocations and contradictions within the discourse of cultural identity.<sup>57</sup> In fact, as we shall see the image of the goddess of the motherland, when seen in terms of a triple-faced mother figure comprising two aspects of the Bharat Mata and Victoria, reveals how complex interactions between colonial notions and indigenous ones were integrated into an emerging middle-class self-image.

The importance of the religious symbolism which shaped the iconography of

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. WS-69.

<sup>56</sup>Tanika Sarkar, 'Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in Nineteenth Century Bengali Literature', EPW, 21 November, 1987, p. 2011.

<sup>57</sup>See Indira Chowdhury Sengupta, 'Mother India and Mother Victoria: Motherhood and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal', South Asia Research, 12:1, 1992, pp. 20-37.

the Bharat Mata cannot be overlooked. There are a number of overlaps between the image of Mother India and attributes of the mother goddess worshipped in Bengal. As Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta has shown the features of Durga and Kali though quite separate, basically emerge out of the worship of sakti and the principles of creation in destruction, good over evil, auspicious over inauspicious form an undifferentiated combine in Bengal.<sup>58</sup> However, in the rapidly changing colonial world, the raw and unaffected image of the goddess Kali, for instance, was rendered respectable and detached from its tribal associations as 'the bhadralok were creating their own image of a goddess endowed with ethereal qualities, and expressing it in songs full of emotional frenzy.'<sup>59</sup> However, an important aspect of bhadralok reconceptualisation of the mother goddess was the manner in which the goddess was related to the goddess of the motherland.

An important technique frequently deployed by the middle-class articulators of this cultural identity, was the allegory of evolutionary forms of the goddess - borrowed from tantrism - otherwise denounced as corrupt and perverted. In his powerfully allegorical piece, 'Dasamahavidya', which appeared in Bankim's Banga Darshan in 1873, Akshay Chandra Sarkar had introduced the notion of the goddess evolving from one manifestation to another, from Tantric texts and infused it with a nationalist dimension: 'I feel that the ten states of India correspond to the

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<sup>58</sup>Shashibhusan Dasgupta, Bharater Shakti-Sadhana O Shakta Sahitya, Calcutta, 1970, pp. 74 -81.

<sup>59</sup> Sumanta Banerjee, 'Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture', in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women, p. 158.

dasamahavidya'.<sup>60</sup>

Prior to her Dhumabati state, the first incarnation of the goddess as Kali takes the place with the arrival of the Aryans and the conflict that results from this. The end of this period is marked by the transformation of the goddess into Bhubanesvari and Sarasi - regal and calm but potentially war-like. The age of Tantra, which follows signals the beginnings of the fall and the corresponding form of the goddess is Bhairavi. In the destruction and cruelty that ensues, she becomes the headless Chinnamasta, the decapitated goddess. The rhetorical strategy at this point shifts from a description of the state of the country to the actions of the goddess identified with it. In all her manifestations, the goddess's metamorphosis matched the needs of the age. At present, the English efforts to revive India have failed and she is now a widow. The arrogant English administrators are asked to concentrate upon this image.

Bharat Mata is now Dhumabati - the widow. In her state of widowhood, she lacks food to nourish her body and clothes to cover herself. Her hair is rough from the lack of oil and unkempt. She has lost her teeth and suffering has made her gaze intense and piercing.<sup>61</sup>

Akshay Kumar weaves into the fabric of the tantric text, the Orientalist constructions of the Indian past - moving deftly from the Aryan and the Muslim period to British India. The equation of the state of present-day India with the state of widowhood signals the dread contained within that state itself. The victimised Bharat Mata of Kiran Chandra's play is a similar manifestation of Dhumabati, the

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<sup>60</sup>Akshay Chandra Sarkar, 'Dasamahavidya' ('Ten Aspects of the Goddess', Banga Darshan 1873, II: 6, reprinted Kalidas Nag (ed.), Akshay Sahitya-Sambhar, Vol I, ('Collected Works of Akshay Chandra Sarkar', Calcutta, 1967, p. 99.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 257.

goddess as widow. What is significant about this nineteenth-century construct is the mechanism of empowering through frailty in the victimised figure of the dispossessed widow as a victim. In the tantric text 'Dasamahavidya', Dhumabati was conceptualised in terms of popular tantrism, as the powerful goddess who destroyed the demon Dhumasura. The goddess adopted the guise of an old widow. She was described as 'ancient, widowed and grey-haired; frail-bodied, tormented by hunger', 'bent and pale-faced' and riding a chariot with the banner of a crow.<sup>62</sup> In the Tantric text, however, this emaciated, aged figure was actually a repository of strength and soon destroyed the demons with fire that emanated from her eyes.<sup>63</sup> But in the nineteenth-century imaging of the Bharat Mata as widow, there is a significant shift: widowhood is no longer a mere guise but the symbol of a pathetic state. In fact, a detail that has been conspicuously absent from scholarly discussions on widow-remarriage and related issues is the reformulation of the icon of the widow encompassing both its pathetic as well as empowering configurations. As we have seen, the very portraiture of Sabitri was being interpreted as exemplary behaviour to be ritualised and practised in order to protect women from the terrible fate of eternal (as opposed to temporal) widowhood. In accordance with the logic of these two categories - eternal and temporal - the Bharat Mata, too, was often represented as a dispossessed widow who could only rely on her sons to reclaim land and possessions that were wrongfully taken from her.

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<sup>62</sup>Bhabani Shankar Tantravisharad, Shachitra Dasamahavidya ('The Illustrated Ten Aspects of the Devi'), Dum Dum, 1900, Preface.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

Akshyay <sup>chandra</sup> Kumar Sarkar's appropriation of the ten stages of the goddess from popular tantra was given a sophisticated articulation in the depiction of the goddess of the motherland in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Ananda Math in 1882. The role of the son as an agent of deliverance was clarified programmatically in Bankim's Ananda Math; where the evolution of the goddess was related to the emergence of her brave sons who restore her glory. The details of the three stages where the figure of 'mother as she was in the past', deteriorates into 'mother in the present' although retaining the potential to become the 'mother as she will become in future' are discussed in Jasodhara Bagchi's article mentioned earlier. Here too, in her present form she is the awesome goddess Kali. This dark goddess, who is supposed to haunt cremation grounds is visualised as dancing on Shiva's chest, thus signifying the reversal of order as well as the parallel between the land of Bharat and the cremation ground. Her meagre weapons, the skull and the scimitar, have been given her by her sons. The final image of the goddess is of Durga, the ten-armed mother, the symbol of power with all her shining weapons. Visualised as riding a lion, 'the most indomitable animal', she is the inspirational force behind the efforts of her santans (children) in Ananda Math. Bankim's reading of the tantric theory of the evolution of the goddess was deeply entrenched in Western notions of evolution and progress. As Bagchi has pointed out in another article, Ananda Math was also Bankim's response to the Positivist ideology of order and progress:

Ananda Math uses important ingredients of Positivist Utopia, in order to create this parable of Nationalist confrontation. Consistent with the mood and temper of Comte's writings, Womanhood becomes the emblem of this threatened Order of Nationhood. Comte's goddess of Humanity acquires a new dimension

as the Devi who is the Motherland.<sup>64</sup>

Bagchi's reading in fact, stresses the deep interactive nature of cultural self-assertion which received Western thought and transformed it in the construction of its own icon of resistance. Bankim Chandra's interest in Western philosophy and the interactions of such ideas within his work has recently received a lot of scholarly attention.<sup>65</sup> The interaction of Western notions and indigenous notions of the self within constructions of the 'nation', can also be perceived in the works of Bankim's lesser known contemporaries, even when they do not engage with philosophical concepts. Bankim articulated at a more sophisticated level what he perceived to be the duty of the nationalist son. This particular affirmation had a very specific appeal for the participants of the Swadeshi movement, as we shall see. Prior to Bankim, in the context of the discourse on Mother India, the devoted nationalist son constructed himself as a link between the glorious past and a future that would match that past. This, however, was not the only strategic means of empowering used in the discourse of the early nationalism. The link between the magnificent past and the radiant future, was also sustained by a fragile and dispossessed figure - the frail Bharat Mata.

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<sup>64</sup>Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Positivism and Nationalism : Womanhood and Crisis in Nationalist Fiction: Bankimchandra's Anandamath', in Sudhakar Marathe and Meenakshi Mukherjee (eds.), Narrative : Forms and Transformations, New Delhi, 1986, p. 69.

<sup>65</sup>See Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse? Delhi, 1986; and the numerous papers of Sudipta Kaviraj and Tanika Sarkar cited in Chapter II.

## Empowering Through Frailty: The Mother as Victim

One of the earliest plays to deal with the image of the dispossessed motherland was Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay's play Bharat Mata.<sup>66</sup> First performed in 1873,<sup>67</sup> its great impact is described by Bipin Chandra Pal in his reminiscences of the early phase of nationalism.<sup>68</sup> A part of this play was performed at that year's Hindu Mela, which perhaps explains the different versions of the title - Bharat Matar Bilap ('The Lament of Mother India') and Bharat Bilap ('India's Lament').<sup>69</sup> The play opens with the figure of Bharat Lakshmi, the goddess of India's fortune, being addressed in a song composed for the Hindu Mela by Dwijendranath Tagore:

Oh Bharat your countenance is like the fading moon,  
By day or night your tears flow incessantly;  
Accustomed as I am to your glowing beauty,  
How can I look upon this pale image of yours?<sup>70</sup>

The Bharat Lakshmi departs with this song. She is obviously a figure who

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<sup>66</sup>Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay refers to this play as Bharat Matar Bilap ('The Lament of Mother India') in Bangiya Natya Shalar Itihas, Calcutta, 1939, p. 136.

<sup>67</sup>P. Guha-Thakurta in his The Bengali Drama: Its Origin and Development, London, 1930, gives 15 February as the date of the first performance and the venue Nainur (Nainan?), while Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay in Bangiya Natya Shalar Itihas refers to the date as 16 February and the venue as Calcutta. Incidentally the Hindu Mela of 1873, took place at Nainan. See Prashanta Kumar Pal, Rabi-Jibani: Vol I : 1268-1284 B.S., 'The Life of Rabindranath: Vol I : 1861- 1878', Calcutta, 1982, p. 196.

<sup>68</sup>Bipin Chandra Pal, Nabayuger Bangla. ('The New Age in Bengal'), Calcutta, 1972, p. 254.

<sup>69</sup>Report in the Amrita Bazar Patrika, quoted in Bandyopadhyay, Bangiya Natyasalar Itihas, p.136, and in Guha-Thakurta, The Bengali Drama, p.150.

<sup>70</sup>Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay, Bharat Mata, Calcutta, 1873, pp. 2-3.

could exist only in the glorious past and the wretchedness of the present fails to keep her. Her retreat from the land is rationalised in terms of the current lack of heroism. The Bharat Mata who enters the scene with the exit of the goddess of fortune is described as an emaciated woman, with hair loose and unkempt; she appeals to her sons: 'Look just once at the misery of your unfortunate mother, my sons! The plundering robbers have taken away all my ornaments. I have no oil for my hair, and how much longer will I have to wear these dull and tattered rags'.<sup>71</sup> With retreat of the goddess of fortune it is up to the miserable, widowed Bharat Mata to attempt to revive herself with the aid of her sons. We shall further explore this particular relationship between the nationalist son and the motherland in Chapters IV and V.

As we have seen in Chapters I and II, the theme of the distant 'Aryan' past, appropriated from Orientalist scholarship a sense of exultation in a golden age of Hinduism. This theme is again reiterated in Kiran Chandra's construction of past glory of the dispossessed Bharat Mata who laments:

Oh! Oh! Oh! what have I been reduced to ? There was a time when this land of Bharat was fragrant with the glorious deeds of my sons. Then, India alone ruled mightily over all the seas and islands of the earth. That was the age when mere twelve year-old boys would appear courageously in the battle-field and instantly send enemies to their doom; and women through miraculous powers saved their captive husbands.<sup>72</sup>

Her present fallen state she attributed to aggorance and pride, for now 'god has shattered my arrogance'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., pp.6-7.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 9.



The glorious past, however, was not a discrete, irrecoverable entity. It was conflated with the capacity which lay dormant in her weak sons even though they have ceased to draw that particular quality to the fore at the present moment.

Nor is Kiran Chandra's victim-figure an isolated example. We find a similar configuration in a satirical piece titled Unabimsa Purana ('The Nineteenth Purana') written by a student of Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's and considerably revised by him and first published anonymously in 1866.<sup>74</sup> Here the Bharat Mata - named Adhi-Bharati, is the widow of Arya-Swami, the embodiment of all that is essentially 'Aryan'. The narrative informs us that after his death at the hands of Muslim invaders the noble kingdom of Aryapur ('The City of the Aryans') came to be occupied by the British personified in the play as St. George. St George attempts to persuade Adhi-Bharati to re-marry, as do her other suitors. Her revulsion at the very thought expresses the tensions inherent in the debates about widow remarriage in nineteenth-century Bengal. The concept of remarriage for a widow thus functioned as a cultural marker: 'Only in a country where virtue is not perceived as the singular adornment of a woman, is widow-marriage not deemed dishonourable'.<sup>75</sup>

The image of the heroic widow is consistent with the concern of the Hindu discourse to reinstate in the figure of the widow - the living sati - the embodiment of heroism and virtue. The widow in her vow of chastity and her commitment to the

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<sup>74</sup>Bhudeb Charit, Part III, Calcutta, 1927, p. 133. For a brief discussion of this tract, see Tapan Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered : Perceptions of West in Nineteenth Century Bengal, Delhi, 1989, p. 34, pp. 63-4.

<sup>75</sup>Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Unabimsa Purana : Swayaswarabhash ('The Nineteenth Purana'), Hooghly, 1869, p. 25.

memory of her dead husband is a figure who negotiates power in terms of virtue. She expresses her anxiety about her sons empowered with virtue in a manner similar to the Bharat Mata of Kiran Chandra's play:

Is there any sign of improvement of the lot of my sons? The education designed by you, only makes them fit to be clerks. One or two boys who do manage to learn something are deprived from higher posts through your cunning. The way you throttle them, their brothers have stopped pursuing higher education out of fear.<sup>76</sup>

In a similar way, the frail Bharat Mata of Kiran Chandra's play, agonises over the sorry state of affairs - her sons are unemployed and denied entry into the army. It is this ironic twist of history that has changed even the fundamental traits of her sons - because now their offspring are 'living the lives of slaves and have forsaken courage altogether'.<sup>77</sup>

Both mother-figures voice concerns that were common during this period - concerns which we have demonstrated were articulated by the Hindu Mela. Again, as evidenced by satirical writings of the 1870s, the notion of the weak and cowardly Bengali had become identified as one of the numerous qualities of the 'effeminate' Babu that lent itself to parody. How did the figure of the dispossessed widow fit into such a framework? What informed her appeal in this context? Although sometimes envisaged as being empowered by virtue to question her oppressor, she was more frequently depicted as the victim-figure. As Tanika Sarkar has pointed out 'for Bengalis, accustomed to the worship of a variety of female cults, emotional resonances

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>77</sup>Bandyopadhyay, Bharat Mata. pp. 6-7.

connected with an enslaved mother figure tended to be particularly powerful.’<sup>78</sup> However, to understand the dynamism of this frail figure we need to look at some of the other qualities that defined her.

In one of the first anthologies of Bengali patriotic songs, Bharat Gan, published in 1879, although the glorious past/degraded present dichotomy is heavily underlined, with the land visualised as a cremation ground and the ‘noble Aryan blood’ invoked, the Bharat Mata’s presence was visualised in terms of a dispossessed woman, often a widow or a woman deranged by suffering. As one song lamented: ‘Oh mother of brave sons, your land lacks the brave’,<sup>79</sup> and in another she was visualised as roaming like a insane creature in the cremation-ground which is Bharat. While in another touching image she was portrayed as an emaciated woman with only the hard ground for her bed:

Oh frail mother of an unfortunate son! The ground is hard, your  
body weak;  
Oh why have you made this your bed?  
Rise up this once, dear mother, let us cut your tresses to make  
you a bed,  
Your sons are poor, and unable to clothe you  
You have nothing but your tresses.<sup>80</sup>

The shorn hair of this frail mother symbolised her dreadful state, just as in the Bharat Mata play she lacked the means to care for it properly. The play which moved

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<sup>78</sup>Tanika Sarkar, ‘Nationalist Iconography’, EPW, 21 November 1987, p. 2011.

<sup>79</sup>Rajkrisna Ray, Bharat Gan : Bharater Prachin O Bartaman Abastha Sambandhiya ebang Swadeshanuraguddipak ek sata Git, (‘One Hundred Inspirational Songs about the Past and Present State of India’), Calcutta, 1879, p. 28.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

its first audiences<sup>81</sup>, in fact, appealed to the vulnerable state of the Bengalis and their motherland. At the roots of the appeal of the victim mother-figure lay the impetus for parallel constructions of motherhood. The disinherited motherland constantly recalled by her shackled presence, the magnificent past. This past contained for its articulators a realisable potential. The play, however, was not without hope for the fallen race of Bengalis. But that hope lay westward - and if only the Bengali looked in the right direction, he would be able to overcome his helpless state. The Bharat Mata herself asks them to appeal to the kind Empress Victoria, and her sons obey:

Where are you Mother - Oh goddess of England? Look upon your orphaned Indian children with mercy. No one but you, Oh Mother can cure us of our particular disease.<sup>82</sup>

At this point an Englishman enters and upbraids the 'wretches' for not having the slightest fear in clamouring for the empress's attention in so vile a manner. For after all, he says, 'What are you to her? Her deepest desire is to see to our welfare and to everything that will fill our coffers with profit.'<sup>83</sup> The theme of the 'bad' intermediary voices itself through this delineation of a corrupt and exploitative Englishman. However, despite bringing to the fore moral musings on the self-interest of the English, the play did not end at this point. In fact, its conclusion reveals much about the problematic nature of the gendered discourse of cultural nationalism.

As we have seen earlier, the Orientalist preoccupation with the Aryan race was

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<sup>81</sup> The Amrita Bazar Patrika reported that the hush that fell over the audience at the National Theatre lasted fifteen minutes, 'only interrupted by the sounds of sighs and weeping among the audience': quoted in Bandyopadhyay, Bangiya Natya Shalar Itihas, p. 136.

<sup>82</sup> Bandyopadhyay, Bharat Mata, p. 10.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

appropriated by the Hindu discourse as a permanent mark of its racial identity. Within the limits of its reasoning, not only was India geographically Aryavarta - the land of the Aryans - but metaphysical terms the only land where that Aryan identity could be reclaimed. In Chapter II, we have demonstrated the way in which the notion of common mother race guided the Hindu discourse in its search for a past. It was through such a construction that the European and the Indian became linked - in a myth of common formation, even as the colonial hegemonic operations maintained the distinct relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Both these factors contributed to kind of acceptability which was extended to Victoria, the imperial matriarch. On the one hand, Victoria became for the early nationalists the very embodiment of Aryan womanliness, and on the other she came to signify the power of command and hegemonic control to which the growing middle-class was itself aspiring. Thus Victoria became before her Bengali subjects a representative of Aryan womanhood. Kshitindranath Tagore, earlier the editor of the influential Tattvabodhini Patrika, writing his Arya Ramanir Siksha O Svadhinata in 1900, (a treatise on the 'Education and Freedom of the Aryan Woman'), found the ideals of Aryan womanhood fulfilled in Queen Victoria.

Victoria was thus transformed into a close kin of the nineteenth century Bengali bhadramahila, whose education and demeanour was one of the foremost concerns of the male articulators of this discourse. According to Kshitindranath, Victoria could have followed in the footsteps of Elizabeth I and easily brought on a tide of corruption and vice into her court, but

her pure family life and her virtuous motherliness, has made her the pride of

not just the English race but also her subjects. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Victoria, empress of India has successfully followed the ideal path of womanhood that Indian rishis have held up before us ... The great Queen, is not only the empress of India but the most suitable mother to her Hindu children - so with the grace and fairness of god she has come to occupy that place.<sup>84</sup>

This was not a mere loyalist statement, it contained, as we shall see when we delve deeper into this important nationalist icon of motherhood, the aspirations of a hegemonising class as well as a positive symbol of ideal Hindu motherhood from within the culture of the rulers. Besides the presence of a mother-figure on the throne of England, it was also her 'unprejudiced' Proclamation of November 1858,<sup>85</sup> that made her too compelling an image to ignore. The manner in which this proclamation was greeted in the district towns of Bengal is recollected by R.C. Dutt:

Hindus and Mussulmans had gathered there, and hailed the Proclamation with shouts of joy; and Brahmins held up their sacred threads and exclaimed Maharani Dirghajibi Haun - May the Great Queen live long.'<sup>86</sup>

The jubilation of a certain class of Hindus and Muslims in 1858 has a continuity with the great faith in the impartiality of the Empress in the 1870s-1890s of the urban middle-class Hindus of Bengal, and the play Bharat Mata and similar

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<sup>84</sup>Kshitindranath Tagore, Arya Ramanir Siksa O Svadhinata, Calcutta, 1900, pp. 15-16. Moreover, like the exemplary bhadramahila, Victoria has been a devoted wife and true to spirit of the Aryan widow she has refused to remarry in the belief that 'her husband is awaiting her'. p.29.

<sup>85</sup>The most frequently quoted portion of Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1 November 1858, is her decision to 'abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects ... and so far as it may be, our subjects of whatever race or creed, be freely and impartially admitted to offices in our service, the duties of which they may be qualified, by their education, ability, and integrity, duly to discharge': quoted in R. C. Dutt, The Economic History of India, Vol II: In the Victorian Age 1837 - 1900, 1901, rpt., Delhi, 1960, pp. 176-7.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p.175.

literary pieces reflected this trust.

The play expressed yet another reverberation of the ambiguous response to the colonial presence in the framing of a cultural identity in its careful distinction between the 'bad' and the 'good' Englishman. This dichotomy remained, as we shall see later in discursive constructions which grew up around the Swadeshi movement of 1905. In Bharat Mata, the arrogant Englishman was attacked by a liberal and 'true' Englishman who thus comforted the frail widow:

Mother, weep no more! even stones would melt beholding your misery! Mother your agony is caused by a few beastly wretches like him! ... The English are not such a lowly race, Mother! Its rare for an English gentleman not to weep when *you* shed tears....Our queen is extremely compassionate. She is even capable of disinheriting her own son for the love of her subjects.... Like your Maharajah Ramachandra, she serves her subjects without bias.<sup>87</sup>

The analogy between the mythical Hindu hero and the 'good' English queen once again drew Victoria into the framework of Hindu cultural identity even as it struggled to define an autonomous space for its articulation. The play ended with the allegorical figures of Forbearance, Courage and Unity urging the sons of India to have patience, to be brave and to unite - with the imperial presence glowing in the background. Although these notions were a part of the English education of the urban elite of Calcutta, who were the self-styled leaders in a cultural revolt, I want to stress that in this project of self-assertion, the figure of Queen Victoria remained a formidable presence. She was too distant to be in any sense real, but her 'maternal' qualities were too close to the gender issues ingrained in the nationalist cultural agenda to be ignored. At a less specific level, England personified as Mother is

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<sup>87</sup>Bandyopadhyay, Bharat Mata, p. 12

perceived as usurping the affection due to the Bharat Mata. In the Unabimsa Purana, Adhi-Bharati accused St. George of using an insidious system of education which has aided in alienating her from her sons. She says: 'They no longer think of me as mother - they no longer ponder on my misfortune and some of them even desire to call another mother.'<sup>88</sup>

However, in the 1870s, the more frequently articulated attitude towards Victoria sees her as a guardian of the Bharat Mata and her children. In a play of 1894, the Bharat Mata thus addressed Victoria:

Are my darlings not yours as well? ...  
They live or die according to your wishes  
Perceiving you to be a goddess.  
Oh do not despise these sons of your maid!  
Think of your own situation, mother!  
The weight of your grief when you'd lost a son,  
And here I am suffering the loss of so many!<sup>89</sup>

The reference here is to the famine that had claimed so many lives in the early 1890s. Therefore even in the face of criticism of the Raj, Victoria was generally perceived as a sympathetic empress. Further, as Kiran Chandra's play emphasised, only certain corrupt Englishmen were the cause of so much distress: British rule was otherwise seen to be fairly benevolent. Within the context of nationalism, then, how can we make sense of this contradiction - the trust in British benevolence which paradoxically situated nationalism within the empire? A partial explanation lies in the non-confrontational nature of nationalism as it was articulated in its earliest form. But

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<sup>88</sup>Anon., Unabimsa Purana, p. 32.

<sup>89</sup>Sarpalankar Thakur (pseud.), Drisyapanchak ba Apsarar Bharat Bhraman ('Five Scenes or the Indian Tour of the Heavenly Nymphs'), Calcutta, 1894, p. 33.



an important dimension of the paradox, so far ignored in studies of motherhood within nationalism is the high esteem for Victoria - the imperial matriarch and her relationship to the nationalist icons of motherhood.

### **Mother Victoria and the Nationalist Agenda**

As we have seen in Chapter I, the Hindu Mela's inclusion of lectures on the Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as lectures on 'Instruments, Physics, Light and Electricity', outlined what characterised progress in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Industry, science and technology were perceived as critical markers of Victorian England. The early nationalist assertion in its desire to walk the path of scientific progress approved the emulation of the West for this purpose. In this mode of 'national' assertion a dismantling of the empire was not required. Nabagopal Mitra's The National Paper, an organ of the Hindu Mela, carried an article entitled 'Our Nationality' on 17 February 1869, which expresses this ambiguity towards the empress:

Our independence consists not in the setting up of a native prince to rule over us, while we have a powerful and intelligent sovereign (No matter that she is European) whose most cherished wishes tend towards our happiness and well-being.<sup>90</sup>

Nabagopal's kind of nationalism would propagate a more integrated Hindu

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<sup>90</sup>'Our Nationality', The National Paper, 17 February 1869, p. 78.

community 'intellectually' and 'morally' independent, without rejecting the empress.<sup>91</sup> To him and his many contemporaries the cause of dependence lay in the realm of thought as 'Shakespeare to Tennyson, from Bacon to Macaulay, the whole body of illustrious British writers are becoming our daily companions without our ever thinking of producing a like one from among us'.<sup>92</sup> The insidious intention of English education was seen to be the cause of this sorry state of affairs.<sup>93</sup> The direct violence of the Muslim era, it was argued, was more desirable as 'the more we were persecuted the more we were determined to stick to all that was our own, till our persecutors were tired and saw that our hatred of them was a shield against their unjust invasions on our rights and customs'.<sup>94</sup> Nabagopal maintained that if only the 'civilised' English had made it easier for the Hindus to hate them, a more militant nationalism might have emerged.

At the heart of Nabagopal's complaint lay the figure of the 'good' queen - who charmed her subjects by being a visible mother-figure. What Victoria, combining the roles of sovereign, wife and mother, had come to signify to the middle classes in

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<sup>91</sup>Tagore's poem 'Dillir Darbar' ('The Durbar at Delhi'), written and recited at the Hindu Mela in 1877, deplored the extravagant Imperial Assembly. While this hints at a different interpretative possibility, the poem did not deal specifically with Victoria. For a brief discussion of this poem and its impact see Chapter I.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>93</sup>For the effects of English Education on India, see Gauri Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India, London, 1990. Viswanathan however deals mainly with official perceptions of the necessity of English education in India. Nabagopal's idea of freedom as expressed here brings out the complex interactive dimensions of what constituted it in opposition to what was officially designated as the educated Indian's sense of 'false independence'. Ibid., p. 163-4.

<sup>94</sup>'Our Nationality', The National Paper, p. 78.

England is eloquently described by her biographer Lytton Strachey:

The public looked on with approval ... the middle classes, in particular, were pleased ... they liked a household which combined the advantages of royalty and virtue, in which they seemed to see, reflected as in some resplendent looking glass, the ideal image of the very lives they led themselves.<sup>95</sup>

The consolidation of what she denoted in India centred around two things - the 'resplendent' imaging of middle-class life in England and, as Bernard Cohn has described it, 'the codification of the ritual idiom' in India.<sup>96</sup> However, I would argue that if 'early nationalists were claiming that they were more loyal to the true goals of the Indian empire than were their English rulers,'<sup>97</sup> it was not merely because the British had successfully implanted a set of ritual codes which were understood and widely deployed by Indians themselves, but because of the complex interaction of ideas at a subterranean level. The image of the Mother-Empress was full of resonances for the early nationalists. Victoria's appeal to early nationalists signified the triumph of the strong mother-figure which they had codified and exalted. As Dorothy Thompson's interesting study of Victoria points out:

If her gender made the monarch more acceptable as a figurehead to the varied nations which made up her empire, it may also have helped to popularize the throne ... the diffusion of cheap printed words and pictures [helped] bring the image of the monarch and her family regularly into the consciousness of her subjects.<sup>98</sup>

In Bengal the image of Victoria was transmitted through numerous descriptions

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<sup>95</sup>Lytton Strachey, Queen Victoria, 1921, London, 6th rpt. 1922, p.141.

<sup>96</sup>Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition, p. 209.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>Dorothy Thompson, Queen Victoria : Gender and Power, London, 1990, p. 139.

of the royal family and came to symbolise the ideal nuclear family, with the capable mother at its head - moulding her children as appropriate future inheritors of the empire. The Bamabodhini Patrika often carried articles about the lives of English women and comparative studies of exemplary mothers. The latter included the biographical sketches of George Washington's mother and Napoleon's mother, while numerous articles on Victoria revealed how close she was to the ideals of the bhadramahila. Most of these articles stress her kindness to her subordinates and her firmness in dealing with her children. As an ideal mother, Victoria taught her daughters to treat their social subordinates with respect. This is illustrated with a story about her uncompromising chastisement of the young princesses who had spoilt the dress of a palace maid.<sup>99</sup> The text mentions how important it was for rulers to 'understand' their subjects despite being accustomed to luxury. Another article on the need to respect agricultural labour mentioned the remarkable example of the empress's children who worked on the royal farm at Balmoral during the vacations, thus upholding her as an exemplary mother devoted to the Victorian ideal of a 'comprehensive' development of the children.<sup>100</sup>

Nor were such articles mere assurances of loyalty, which official discourse alleged that Bengalis lacked. Several nationalists proclaimed their admiration for the great empress and saw no conflict in their straightforward admiration. Nationalist leader Bipin Chandra Pal thus justified his respect for the empress:

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<sup>99</sup>'Maharagni Victoriar Santan Pratipalan' ('The Empress Victoria's Bringing up of her Children'), Bamabodhini Patrika, VI:89, 1870, pp. 255-7.

<sup>100</sup>'Bikhyata Krisakgan' ('Famous Farmers') in Bamabodhini Patrika, XI:143, 1875, p. 87.

1887 was the Jubilee year of Queen Victoria's reign, and I was moved to take advantage of it to write a biography of Her Majesty. The life of Victoria made a strong appeal to me on account of her character far more than because of her high position as the head of the British Empire ... I published it myself, and though it cost me nearly a thousand rupees I was not a loser by this venture.<sup>101</sup>

Significantly Bipin Chandra Pal did not see his admiration for the empress as conflicting with his nationalist ideology. For what lay at the heart of her appeal were the twin images of exemplary mother and wife.

Another biography of the empress presumably written for school children, was by Krishna Kumar Mitra, later an active Swadeshi nationalist. Krishna Kumar's illustrated life of Victoria, Victoria-Charit: Shachitra, published in 1898, stressed the womanly virtues in the empress. Not only was Victoria akin to the ideal Hindu woman, with her 'great trust in god'<sup>102</sup>, but also, on account of her sympathetic nature, 'millions of her subjects within the empire, have established her in the immortal throne of their hearts'.<sup>103</sup> Amongst all available examples, the most eloquent tribute to the imperial matriarch was expressed in the numerous hymns to Victoria composed and set to music by Raja Sir Sourindro Mohun Tagore. Sourindro Mohun, the raja from Pathuriaghata, had become a Doctor of Music from Oxford University in 1876, a CIE in 1880 and a Knight Bachelor of the United Kingdom in

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<sup>101</sup>Bipin Chandra Pal, Memories of my Life and Times: Vol II (1886-1900), p. 19. I have not been able to locate a copy of Bipin Chandra Pal's biography of Victoria.

<sup>102</sup>Krishna Kumar Mitra, Victoria-Charit: Shachitra, ('An Illustrated Life of Victoria'), Calcutta, 1898, p. 70.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

1884, was also an active participant in the Hindu Mela.<sup>104</sup> He had written and read out the important Jatiya Sangit Bisayak Prastab or a Treatise on National Music at the third Jatiya Sabha or National Association, an offshoot of the Hindu Mela, on 22 May 1870.<sup>105</sup> Sourindra Mohun had published three different books of songs on Victoria between 1875 and 1897.<sup>106</sup> Of these the second was composed on Victoria's assumption of the title of Indiae Imperatrix and the last on the completion of her sixtieth regnal year. In both Sourindro Mohun laid great emphasis on the length of Victoria's reign.<sup>107</sup> Sourindro Mohun's composition provided English translations of the Sanskrit originals. Early in the text, Victoria was placed on the same plane as the Hindu kings:

O highly favoured Victoria, Him, Whose will has enabled Thee to reign longer than Chandra-gupta and Asoka, who is Eternal, and One without a second, - Him do I reverence for thy prosperity.<sup>108</sup>

Apart from the unique duration of her reign, Sourindro Mohun also identified the distinguishing features of progress in the Victorian empire, linking up events in

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<sup>104</sup>See Subodh Sengupta ed., Samsad Bangali Charitabhidan, Calcutta, 1976, p.521. An advertisement in The National Paper of 26 October 1870, mentioned that the Raja offered annual prizes at the Hindu Mela.

<sup>105</sup>The text survives as a book, Prashanta Kumar Pal mentions that he had read this out before the National Association. See Pal, Rabi-Jibani: Vol I, p. 143.

<sup>106</sup>These were Victoria Gitika (1875), Victoria Samrajyan (1876) and Srimad-Victoria-Mahatyam (1897).

<sup>107</sup>Longevity, Thompson has observed, was an important facet of her significance for it served to stress the hardiness of the English race. Thompson, Victoria, p. 138.

<sup>108</sup>Raja Sir Sourindro Mohun Tagore, Srimad-Victoria-Mahatyam: The Greatness of the Empress Victoria: A Sanskrit Poem Set to Music, with an English Translation and Sixty-Three Illustrations, Descriptive of Sixty Years of Her Majesty's Sovereignty. London, 1897, Canto I, Stanza 5.

her life with markers of scientific progress:

O Thou possessor of good fortune, in 1838, Thy subjects performed the ceremony of Thy coronation with great joy and magnificence. In this year, the telegraphic wires, which convey news quicker than thought, were for the first time set up in England, and the rail road from London, which has become a source of convenience to the people at large, was laid down in London.<sup>109</sup>

It was precisely in the ways in which Victoria's reign came to be associated with progress along scientific lines, that had its specific appeal for the English-educated Bengali middle-classes.

Sourindro Mohun Tagore's hymn to Victoria, despite its emphasis on progress saw Victoria as essentially signifying motherhood above everything else. Indeed, even in England, Victoria's combination of the two roles of mother and monarch came to 'support ... the domestic view of women's role than any suggestion that women should enter the active world of politics.'<sup>110</sup> One of the pictures in Sourindro Mohun's book, was of Victoria with the infant Prince Arthur, her gaze fixed Madonna-like upon his face. Thus establishing her as embodying the 'tradition' of motherhood so important to 'Hindu' nationalism and linking the Christian icon of the Madonna with the motherhood that was seen as a sign of Hindutva.

Victoria's then is the third face of this three-faced goddess of nationalism. Sourindro Mohun's hymn in fact, ends with the genie of Poetry and Music blessing Victoria - 'the destroyer of the darkness of ignorance and the dispeller of the fear of the god of death - bless you in these words - "Beest Thou the abode of bliss, O

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<sup>109</sup>Ibid., Canto III, Stanza 2; set to Ragini Malasri.

<sup>110</sup>Thompson, Victoria, p. 144.

Victoria!"'.<sup>111</sup>

Many elite families that participated in national events like the Hindu Mela expressed their fascination with Victoria in different ways and saw no conflict in their stance. The Tagores of Jorasanko, had not only celebrated the golden jubilee of Victoria's reign in 1887, by illuminating their house, but had also especially hired a house in order to see the Prince of Wales during his visit in 1875. While in January 1890, they had donated Rs 500 to the Prince Albert Victor Reception Committee.<sup>112</sup>

If the site of such articulations were upper class gatherings, or journals designed for the middle classes, this hegemonising project also attempted to include popular forms of expression. A baul song composed by 'Kangal Fikirchand' and sung at Victoria's diamond jubilee celebrations at Kumarkhali entreats:

Says Fikir, O Jagadamba! Look up once;  
By granting Mother a long life, save poor India.<sup>113</sup>

Another such song composed around the same time, rejoices:

Take up the British flag and cry out in joy!  
Empress Victoria - virtuous wife and the mother of orphans,  
So long as she is present in our land,  
The sun shall never set!<sup>114</sup>

She was thus described in terms used to describe the Bharat Mata. A celebratory song also serenaded the glorious Bharat Mata of the past and lamented her

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<sup>111</sup>Tagore, Srimad Victoria-Mahatyam, Canto III, Stanza 72.

<sup>112</sup>See Prashanta Kumar Pal, Rabi-Jibani: Vol III, 1212-1300 B.S., ('Life of Rabindranath: Vol III, 1885-94'), Calcutta, 1987, p. 62.

<sup>113</sup>Satish Chandra Majumdar, Kangal-Fikirchand Fakirer Baul Sangit, ('The Baul Songs of Kangal Fikir Chand'), Kumarkhali, 1903, p. 163.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 162.



present state.<sup>115</sup> That these 'baul' songs were fabricated and actually composed by Harinath Majumdar of Kumarkhali, has been pointed out by Upendranath Bhattacharya in his study Banglar Baul O Baul Gan ('The Bauls of Bengal and their Songs').<sup>116</sup> Not only was Harinath Majumdar the editor of the periodical Grambartaparakashika, instituted in 1863, but he also was the head-teacher of the Kumarkhali pathshala. The implications of such compositions lay in the hegemonising aspect of the Hindu discourse on motherhood, that sought to speak on behalf of other classes and devise an integrated articulation of an Indian/Bengali/Hindu self.

So far, I have tried to demonstrate how the pre-eminence granted to motherhood within the context of nationalism made possible Victoria's inclusion. But was such an inclusion a case of strategic resistance articulating itself? Did nationalism engender an identity which began by strategically merging with the ruling power only to emerge later as a discrete and differentiated identity? As James C. Scott has suggested, the myth of the compassionate sovereign is one of the numerous strategies which the 'hidden transcript of resistance' employs. To elaborate, the over-arching theme in this myth is the benevolent ruler who desires to free the serfs but is hindered by wicked court officials.<sup>117</sup> Can Victoria, then be regarded as a standard to which the corrupt English administrators are incapable of conforming? While such an explanation in terms of a 'political disguise', to use Scott's words, seems viable on

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>116</sup>Upendranath Bhattacharya, Banglar Baul O Baul Gan ('The Bauls of Bengal and Their Songs', Calcutta, 1957, p. 103.

<sup>117</sup>James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, New Haven, 1990, pp. 96-103.

the one hand, on the other, the very fact that Victoria is constructed as an embodiment of motherhood by an aspiring middle-class, renders such an explanation ambiguous.

At another level, is it possible to view the adaptation of Victoria as a mother-figure sharing similarities with the initial inclusion of Mother Spain in the Katipunan revolt of 1896 in the Philippines, and the severance of the bond when 'the struggle for independence' was perceived in terms of the 'breaking of the relationship with Mother Spain,' and a 'reordering and unification of the masses under their true mother - Mother Filipinas'?<sup>118</sup> While the Katipunan revolt was a peasant revolt, having more in common with the myth of the benevolent Tsar<sup>119</sup>, we are here concerned with a nationalist self-definition which was being articulated by an educated elite. We cannot deny that the nationalist middle class while fashioning an identity was also designing a desirable self-portrait - and in the process replicating the colonial structure placing itself at its crest and imposing such a self-portraiture on subordinate groups. This makes it possible to regard Victoria both as a symbol of fulfilled motherhood and as an abstraction signifying control and command. While her august presence as a mother-figure also corresponded with middle-class anxiety about strong, healthy and courageous offspring who would be capable of taking the struggle to its 'true' destination, Victoria as monarch also denoted their putative self-image as leaders.

Literature of this period written by women, does not reveal the degree of same concentration on the English empress, although she is held up as a suitable model in

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<sup>118</sup>Raynaldo Ileto, Pasyon and Revolution : Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910, Quezon City, Metro Manila, 1979, p. 193-4.

<sup>119</sup>See Daniel Field, Rebels in the Name of the Tsar, Boston, 1976.

journals for women. The Bamabodhini articles, discussed earlier, which did talk about the firmness of her character, her sympathetic and kind nature, are mostly unsigned and as the journal was instituted by male reformers for the edification of women, one can only surmise that Victoria was perceived by the editorial board as belonging to that revered category of exemplary women it filled its columns with. Victoria, as we have attempted to show fulfilled her public role as monarch without disrupting her private domestic life. This together with the need for approval and approbation from the European superiors which often expressed gratitude to the Europeans viewers, as we saw in the case of the Hindu Mela, was not merely a strategic inclusion capable of reversing into a subversive project. The contradictory nature of early nationalism in Bengal, expressed itself in these terms partly because it was a hegemonising project and partly because the benevolent ruler was perceived as a model worth emulating. In a play written to commemorate Victoria's diamond jubilee, Hindus were designated as sons of Bharat. Here, a son of Bharat explains to a Muslim son (thus incorporating the dichotomy between Hindus - the 'natural' inheritors of Bharat and Muslims - the outsiders): 'The English rulers have granted us the freedom which Russia, France, Austria and Germany lack'.<sup>120</sup>

This display of benevolence by the reigning Government, in turn, mirrored a benevolent self-portrait of the dominant elites to other subordinate classes as well as to itself.<sup>121</sup> Within such a framework, the inclusion of the ruler within the nationalist

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<sup>120</sup>Durgadas De, Jubilee Yagna, ('Jubilee Celebrations'), Calcutta, 1897, p. 7.

<sup>121</sup> See Scott, Domination, P. 18, 49. I am suggesting that such nationalist articulations by the middle class attempted to hegemonise and the inclusion of the empress is part of this

agenda was an attempt by its elite articulators to demonstrate to itself and subordinates what it chose to identify with. Mother Victoria, therefore, was not only a figure from whom emanated a certain sense of security but also a figure who contained their aspirations. Victoria existed, at least within the discursive construct of self-hood of early nationalism, on the same plane as the mythologised Mother India. In fact, all three figures representing Motherhood were integrated into the self-descriptions of the nationalist Bengali male. As we shall see a rapid change took place with the events of 1905. With the Partition of Bengal, a shift took place within nationalist thinking. This shift, once again took place according to the same logic that had earlier made possible Victoria's inclusion. These points have been so far ignored, because studies in motherhood and nationalism have not looked at the earlier inclusion of Victoria within nationalist discourse.

The correspondence between the contained sexuality of mythological figures like Sabitri and nationalist constructions of Mother Victoria is fairly obvious. The nexus between the two icons of womanhood - the chaste wife and the powerful and sacrificing mother - is complex and entangled in questions about female sexuality which had been brought into sharp focus in contemporary debates about the Age of Consent Bill and the Restitution of Conjugal Rights. The Mother-figure who had to sacrifice her sons for the freedom of the country, a construct that became very important during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, had a non-sexual presence. Her empowerment derived from the control and sublimation of her sexuality.

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process.

## Conclusion

The study of these icons of gender with their specific resonances reveal the paradoxical nature of articulations of a distinctive, Bengali/Hindu cultural identity. It also reveals how certain essences could be upheld as typical of Bengali/Hindu culture while denying the assumptions of exoticism so common to Orientalist glorification of the East. The ambiguity in the way in which the practice of sati was depicted and its transformation into a metaphor for female empowerment illustrates how a gender icon came to signify the essence of an oppositional cultural identity. As it groped to validate its distinguishing marks, this discourse of cultural identity rejected the European preoccupation with woman's physicality and located in figures like Victoria, gleaned from the West, the Hindu virtue of devotion and spiritual strength.

If this discourse was about 'refining' Hinduism it was also about inscribing the limits of that refinement. Women who were vessels of this refining process had to sustain the delicate balance between self-improvement in terms of breaking certain traditional barriers and the preservation of some of the defining essences of Hindu culture. The limitations of the role envisaged for women was thus inscribed in the very process of scripting these feminine icons. Even as heroic womanhood became a symbol of cultural resistance, the norms prescribed for women functioned to restrict the discussion to the bhadramahila and her surroundings and marginalised women from other subordinate social groups. On the one hand the compensatory mechanics of the heroic imaging of women attempted to answer colonial allegations about the weak male, on the other, the axiom : a brave mother begets brave sons, invoked the

figure of an imaginary bir-mata who awaited liberation from her foreign oppressors at the hands of her sons. The story of her liberation was modelled predictably in terms of a story of sacrifice and renunciation. Both these themes were explored and given shape through the interpretation of what constituted a Hindu masculinity within an assertive and oppositional cultural identity and it is to one of the main articulators of this heroic masculinity that we shall now turn.

## CHAPTER IV

### RECONSTRUCTING SPIRITUAL HEROISM:

#### SWAMI VIVEKANANDA (1863-1902)

As we have seen in the last chapter the redefinition of a different femininity was an important facet of the cultural identity the Hindu discourse attempted to frame. Identifying Hindu womanhood as epitomising sacrifice and heroism, the emerging discourse on Hindu cultural identity attempted to shift the focus away from the colonial denigration of the weak Bengali male. Writing in 1899, Swami Vivekananda recapitulated some central themes of the nineteenth-century Hindu discourse. By selectively drawing upon an available Hindu repertoire of images, Vivekananda highlighted a different aspect of masculinity that could match the heroic sacrificing femininity:

O India! Forget not the ideal of thy womanhood is Sita, Savitri, Damayanti; forget not that the God thou worshipest is the great Ascetic of ascetics, the all-renouncing Shankara, the Lord of Uma...<sup>1</sup>

Vivekananda in this long essay, entitled 'Modern India', brought together the 'new' sati with all the connotations of dauntless resistance and posited Shankara, the counterpart of the Mother Goddess as signifying purusha - the male principle as the corresponding masculine counterpart. In this chapter we shall demonstrate how a

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<sup>1</sup>Swami Vivekananda, 'Modern India' translated from a Bengali contribution to the Udbodhana, March 1899, rpt., in The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Mayavati Memorial Edition, Calcutta, 1989, Vol IV, pp. 479-80. All references are cited from this edition of The Complete works of Swami Vivekananda, subsequently referred to as CWSV, unless otherwise stated.

significant shift operated to create an oppositional masculine identity out of the elements of an indigenous repertoire. Vivekananda's construction of an oppositional Hindu identity set itself up through the reinterpretation and reconstruction of Hinduism by concentrating on the icon of the sannyasi, an icon which was to have a tremendous appeal for the Swadeshi activists after 1905. The icon of the sannyasi, its appeal to the Bengali middle class and its role in constructing a nationalist identity has not been adequately explored in existing studies of nationalism in Bengal.

Much of the traditional hagiographic scholarship on Vivekananda sees him as an exceptional and even ahistorical figure, who admirably represented Hinduism on a world platform.<sup>2</sup> This hagiography, however, has made important and useful contributions in terms of the compilation of source materials.<sup>3</sup> In the last decade scholars have approached Vivekananda and his mentor Ramakrishna Paramahansa more analytically, locating both within the religious ferment of nineteenth-century Bengal. However, many of these studies have focussed on the continuities between Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and the formation of the Ramakrishna Math in terms of a self-contained religious movement with minimal reference to the historical origins

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<sup>2</sup>A Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples, Mayavati, 1912, and Shankari Prasad Basu, Vivekananda O Samakalin Bharatbarsha, Vols. 1-7, Calcutta, 1975-1981, to name only two instances.

<sup>3</sup>Shankari Prasad Basu and Sunilbihari Ghosh, Vivekananda in Indian Newspapers: 1893-1902, Calcutta, 1969. Marie Louise Burke, Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries, Calcutta, 1958, and Swami Vivekananda, His Second Visit to the West: New Discoveries, Calcutta, 1973.



of the movement.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the Religious Studies approach, there have been a number of studies on Vivekananda's political thought which have identified him as a nation-builder.<sup>5</sup> None of these studies, however, have attempted to locate Vivekananda in terms of the broader historical climate within which he functioned or in the specific resonances he brought to certain given icons which gained an unprecedented significance during the nationalist movement.

The renewed interest in cultural studies and intellectual history has persuaded some scholars to look more closely into Vivekananda's religious appeal. David Gilmore, in a study of cross-cultural definitions of manhood has mentioned the importance of Vivekananda's restructuring of 'manliness', which 'was already a part of Hindu culture', as an example of 'the usefulness of sexual ideology in nationalist movements'.<sup>6</sup> Sumit Sarkar's 1985 study of Ramakrishna is a significant departure from the earlier scholarship. He draws attention to the Ramakrishna and his impact upon the Bengali middle class and makes an important though brief observation about

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<sup>4</sup>This treatment can be discerned in the Religious Studies oriented research of Harold W. French, The Swan's Wide Waters: Ramakrishna and Western Culture, Port Washington, N.Y., 1974; George M. Williams, The Quest for Meaning of Svami Vivekananda: A Study of Religious Change (Chico, California, 1974; Solange Lemaitre, Ramakrishna and the Vitality of Hinduism, Woodstock, N.Y., 1984, and Arvind Sharma, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda: New Perspectives, New Delhi, 1989, to name a few.

<sup>5</sup>See Santi L. Mukherji, The Philosophy of Man-Making: A Study in Social and Political ideas of Swami Vivekananda, Calcutta, 1971. A comparative study of Vivekananda's political ideas is offered by D. G. Dalton, Indian Idea of Freedom: Political Thought of Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, Gurgaon, 1982. The Indian State has of course labelled him as a nation-builder and has published V.K.R.V. Rao's Swami Vivekananda: The Prophet of Vedantic Socialism, Delhi, 1979, as a part of its 'Builders of Modern India Series'.

<sup>6</sup>David D. Gilmore Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity New Haven, 1990, pp. 185-6.

Ramakrishna's primary disciple, Vivekananda. To quote:

The significance of the message of catholicity was also subtly modified over time. A way of smoothing over tensions within bhadralok Hindu society in Ramakrishna's lifetime, it was to become an argument for the essential superiority of the Hindu tradition vis-a-vis the West. And there was no precedent at all in Ramakrishna - quite contrary in fact - for Vivekananda's passionate pleas for social service (connected with the first-hand awareness of mass poverty brought home to him by his travels in the country after 1890) or his patriotism.<sup>7</sup>

Tapan Raychaudhuri, on the other hand, in his important 1988 study, examines Vivekananda's role within the context of the 'nineteenth century religious quest in Bengal', which was 'a mixture of piety, this-worldly morality and cultural self-assertion, the last partly provoked by the challenge of Christianity and the European criticism of Hindu ways.'<sup>8</sup> Raychaudhuri's subtle study of Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda has contributed to our understanding of the interactions of European notions and received traditional ones. Raychaudhuri's main concern is, however, with Vivekananda's perceptions of the West. While Western concepts remain very much the context of Vivekananda's articulations, this chapter will concentrate on the ways in which such notions were moulded into a reorganised Hindu self-description.

The primary concern of this chapter is Vivekananda's particular location within the matrix of ideas that surrounded him, how he chose to articulate them, the aspects he emphasised and the specific aspects of these ideas which appealed to the early

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<sup>7</sup>Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kathamrita as a Text: Towards an Understanding of Ramakrishna Paramahansa', Delhi, 1985, pp. 112-3.

<sup>8</sup>Tapan Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal, Delhi, 1989, p. 219.

nationalist imagination in the Swadeshi period. Despite these two fine studies, the need remains to study the emerging Hindu discourse of the nineteenth century in terms of a reconstruction which took over ideas from the religious sphere and translated them into principles that were perceived as permeating every aspect of a national culture. Through an examination of specific features of Vivekananda's ideas, this chapter will argue that in nineteenth-century Bengal, the components of Hinduism that were employed to define a 'national' culture, transcended accepted religious precepts and transformed Hindu spirituality into a mode of resistance for the burgeoning Bengali middle class as it framed its own identity within colonial parameters.

The emerging Hindu discourse articulated and nurtured by institutions like the Hindu Mela, typified a search for a self-descriptive, indigenous idiom that could accommodate traditional notions that were 'acceptable' to the Western-educated middle class simultaneously adapting Western ideas that could be moulded into the 'spirit' of this specific kind of identity. As we have seen in Chapter I, this identity deployed the term 'Hindu' but sketched its identity in terms of an oppositional cultural identity in the context of British denigrations of the Bengali middle-class. Another significant aspect was the imparting of a coherent Aryan genealogy to this reconstructed Hindu identity. The more immediate forebears of Hindu heroism were, as we have seen in Chapter II, the Rajputs and the Marathas. By connecting the ancient Aryans with Rajputs and Marathas the discourse sought to articulate a specific heroic masculinity. It was with reference to such constructions that we must evaluate Vivekananda's contribution to a spiritually heroic masculinity in the icon of a sannyasi or ascetic.

## Defining the Ideal Hindu

Orientalist discourse essentialised Hindu culture and through its arguments for a 'golden age' of Hinduism had linked the glorious Aryan past with 'true' Hinduism. Although the early nineteenth-century wave of Orientalist researches gave the contemporary reconstruction of Hinduism its drive and direction, the reconstructed Hindu discourse did not define itself on Orientalist terms alone. While Orientalist scholarship evolved a redefinition of what was 'Hindu', such notions were evaluated and appropriated at various different levels of meaning. The Orientalist dichotomy between the 'gentle' Hindu and the 'barbaric' Muslim with the underlying emphasis on civilised Christian attempts to understand the Hindus, were appropriated by the Hindu discourse and reallocated with a different set of meanings. In Bengal at least, as we have emphasised, this shift was informed by the colonial insistence on the physical debility of the Bengalis and the elaboration of the theory of the martial races that prevented Bengalis from joining the army.

The historical sensibility, as we have observed, envisaged the weak Bengalis as descendants of the hardy Marathas and the gallant Rajputs. However, even within this self-descriptive indigenous discourse which emerged in opposition to negative colonial descriptions of the Babu, there existed a series of satirical works on the Bengalis, by Bengalis, often emphasising that this 'fallen' race was reduced to this low state only in the recent past.<sup>9</sup> This concept of the infirm and easily assailable

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<sup>9</sup>This tradition included poets like Ishvar Gupta, and writers Kaliprasanna Sinha, who used the pen name 'Hutom' to write his satirical sketches of Calcutta Babus, Hutom Pyanchar

Bengali, whose inferior social position had dulled his mind and made him incapable of learning noble concepts, found direct expression in satirical pieces, but popular literary forms like the historical romance, as we have seen in Chapter II, also aided in deflecting the negative image often masking it with alternative images of heroic and capable male figures. However, there also existed other constructions of heroic male figures and Vivekananda's articulations precipitated an alternative heroism.

If ideas of Rajput and Maratha heroism valorised physical vigour, there was a simultaneous emphasis on the integration of the physical and the mental. Such a consolidated definition was given to the concept of dharma by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in Dharma-Tattva in 1888. In Chapter V - entitled Anushilan (literally 'practice'), he defined this concept incorporating positivistic, Western notions as well as indigenous ones that had been invoked in discussions about the nature of dharma. In Bankim, as in other participants in such discussions, such articulations were characterised by an anxiety to draw the boundaries of the discourse carefully, so that the end-product was a recognisable attempt at self-definition. Dharma-Tattva is cast in the form of a dialogue between a guru, a teacher and a shishya or a pupil; when the shishya imputes to the guru an appropriation of Western notions in his definition of dharma, he replies:

I am not exactly following the ways of the Occident and I trust that I am not bound to. Indeed, my purpose would find fulfilment in following Truth. We have now categorized all the faculties of man into four: 1) Physical 2) Intellectual 3) Executive 4) Aesthetic. The just development and growth of all

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Naksha in 1862 and even Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

these and their balance is humanism.<sup>10</sup>

Bankim's definition of dharma, though framed in humanistic terms, is identified as something that pervaded every aspect of a Hindu's life. He particularly emphasised the importance of the physical and the need to cultivate bodily strength - a concern that stretched to include diet.<sup>11</sup> If the notion of dharma functioned at the levels of the physical, emotional and intellectual, the figure of the ideal Hindu incorporated all these dimensions. For Bankim, the figure of Krishna was one of instances of an exemplary Hindu.<sup>12</sup> Apart from Krishna in Bankim's fiction, the sannyasi-santans of Ananda Math forged another version of Krishna's reformulated masculinity. We shall briefly discuss some of the qualities epitomised by Bankim's heroic ascetics, before looking at the way in which Vivekananda articulated an alternative masculinity in terms of a sannyasi icon.

While the image of the wandering sannyasi had its particular descriptive reverberation within various Hindu sects, Orientalist research carried out by the Asiatic Society in the 1820s and 30s, saw India as a society of multitudinous sects, and itself

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<sup>10</sup>Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Dharma-Tattva, in Jogesh Chandra Bagal (ed.), Bankim Rachanabali, Vol. II, Calcutta, 1969, p. 595.

<sup>11</sup>Bankim's guru draws upon the Bhagavat Gita to illustrate his point about the importance of diet : 'The suitable diet of a righteous man,' said the Guru, 'is that which increases longevity, enthusiasm, health and strength; it is that which is palatable, cooling and heartening, above all nutritious and also looks appetizing'- thus incorporating the notion of physical strength with righteousness. Ibid., p. 610.

<sup>12</sup>Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Myth of Praxis : The Construction of the Figure of Krishna in Krishnacarita', New Delhi, 1987, p. 81.

as capable of mapping and accounting for each type of cultural practice.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, colonial records had commented at length on the menacing image of the Sannyasi-Fakir, perceiving them to be militant, rebellious and traversing 'the chief part of Bengal, begging, stealing, and plundering wherever they go, and as it best suits their convenience to practice.'<sup>14</sup> Gleaning his material from historical sources, Bankim had restructured the image of the santans (literally, 'children of the Motherland') of Ananda Math to contain a specific spiritual resonance that would enable these ascetic figures to transcend their colonial classification as plundering bandits.<sup>15</sup>

Engaged in a campaign against the Muslim rulers, the santans of Bankim's novel perceived their task in terms of sacrifice and rigorous spiritual discipline that would eventually free the enslaved Motherland. Satyananda, the leader of this group tells the well-to-do Mahendra a lay person and a newcomer to their Math that the task of a santan is a difficult one:

*Satyananda:* The task of a santan is a difficult one. Anyone who is not a renouncer in the absolute sense, is not fit to carry out this work. One whose

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<sup>13</sup>Of particular importance were H.H. Wilson's articles in the Asiatick Researches, in 1828, which apart from systematizing the various types of Indian ascetics also indicated the various kinds of austerities that were practised by them. Wilson's articles were of particular importance because of the influence they yielded in contemporary Bengali society through their Bengali counterpart by Akshyay Kumar Datta titled Bharatvarsher Upashak Sampraday (1870 and 1883) which soon became a model of historical research.

<sup>14</sup> W.W. Hunter Annals of Rural Bengal, 1868, 5th ed., London 1872, p. 70-1.

<sup>15</sup>The novel was in his journal Banga Darshan between 1880 - 1882, and first published as a book in 1882. With the famine of 1776 as its background, Bankim's santans were celibate sannyasis. However, it was only in the third edition of the novel that he included extracts from Gleig's Memoirs of the Life of Warren Hastings and W.W. Hunter's The Annals of Rural Bengal, to link his ascetics to the rebellious Sannyasi-fakirs of 1773.

soul is tied to the cord of Maya is like the kite which tied to the string always falls to the ground and can never fly...There are two types of santans - the initiated and the uninitiated. The uninitiated are householders or beggars. They turn up at the time of war, they take their share of the spoils and other rewards and disappear. The initiated are the those who have renounced everything. They are the leaders of the group...If you are not initiated then you will never be entrusted with any important work.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the 'work' of this militant group of ascetics could never be defined in terms of worldly gains, for, as Satyananda put it, 'We do not want a kingdom - but we only want to eliminate the entire race of Muslims because they denounce god.'<sup>17</sup> Bankim's novel had already established the 'work' of sannyasis almost in terms of a crusade to rid the Motherland of non-believers. Moreover, the religion of the santans was defined in terms of exercising physical and spiritual power. These themes return in a different guise in Vivekananda's delineation of the sannyasi figure.

Apart from Bankim's depiction, the paradoxical image of the political sannyasi, which was to have a tremendous appeal for participants in the Swadeshi movement of 1905, was a powerful nineteenth-century construct. That the figure of the ascetic could also be threatening had been demonstrated by the Sannyasi Rebellion. But in late nineteenth century Bengal, the aggressive aspect of the sannyasi was further consolidated by assimilating politics - a concept which lay outside the norms that defined the Hindu ascetic. This incorporation also erased aspects that had been

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<sup>16</sup>Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Ananda Math, in Bankim Rachanabali, Vol I, Calcutta, 1953, pp. 697-8.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 698.



designated as peculiar by the colonial discourse.<sup>18</sup>

The notion of a political sannyasi had by the 1890s gained unprecedented significance. On 19 January 1870, Nabagopal Mitra's National Paper, an organ of the Hindu Mela, sponsored by the Tagores of Jorasanko, published an obituary on a 'Sannyasi Political' in Cutch. The late Anandashram Swamy, 'a native of Bengal', who 'belonged to a mercantile family of Calcutta', was an exemplary present-day rishi:

His moral and political aspirations were those of the educated native ... he preached to crowds of men and women the duty of doing spiritual service to God and good to man ... His advice to native Princes was judicious and firm. he would never consent to their yielding a jot of their just right to the demands of the Political officers of the British Government, but he insisted also on the reforms of their administrations as a prime duty and function of their existence.<sup>19</sup>

What is of particular interest here is the attempt at fitting the figure of the ancient rishi into a contemporary framework. Anandashram Swamy's political awareness is appreciated as a higher mode of knowing on account of such an awareness being separate from the everyday pleasures of life. A report on a comparable figure appeared in the Calcutta weekly Sanjivani in the 1890s.<sup>20</sup> This construction of the political

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<sup>18</sup>As one observer put it: '...under the combined influence of the physical, political and social conditions...aided powerfully by the intellectual and moral peculiarities of the people, a dull stagnation has been for ages the unenviable lot of ... the Indian people - a state very conducive to mental depression and gloomy religious abnegation and ascetic living.' See John Campbell Oman, The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India : A Study of Sadhuism, with an Account of the Yogis, Sannyasis, Bairagis, and other Strange Hindu Sectarians, London, 1903, rpt., Delhi, 1973, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup>'In Memoriam of a Sannyasi Political', National Paper, 19 January 1870, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup>This particular political sannyasi intended to go to England with two petitions to the Secretary of State and to the British Parliament, with 23 complaints from Indians. These include the 'murder of natives by Europeans ... the violation of chastity of coolie women ...

sannyasi, in fact, eliminated the exotic and relocated him in the present, while retaining the distinctive resonance of the image. In the process this established the notion of a political sannyasi as one who took up the grievances of the people and therefore, one who could claim greater credibility for thus approaching the problems in a disinterested light. Moreover, the image of a socially committed sannyasi was also deployed in discursive constructions during this period.<sup>21</sup> Vivekananda's reformulation of the sannyasi figure, together with his interest in Bankim Chandra's writings,<sup>22</sup> fed into certain trends which already existed in contemporary perceptions of the significance of a sannyasi. It is within this wider frame that we shall attempt to locate the conceptualisation of the role of a sannyasi.

### **Vivekananda and the Ideal of Manliness**

The traditional image of the wandering sannyasi was, then, reorganised in certain radical ways by the self-descriptive Hindu discourse in fiction as well as reportage about contemporary events. Juxtaposed with the notion of brahmacharya, (celibacy)

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interference with religion ... circular ordering a supply of prostitutes for the army' among others. See Sanjivani, 8 November 1890, Reports of the Native Newspapers: Bengal (RNP), No.46 of 1890, p. 1034-5. Details are published from the same issue of the Sanjivani, in No.47. of RNP, 1890.

<sup>21</sup> The anonymous sannyasi in Chandicharan Sen's novel Jhansir Rani, ('The Queen of Jhansi'), 2nd edition, Calcutta, 1894, ostensibly transcends his caste identity and bears political messages across the land.

<sup>22</sup>In a conversation with the Bengali revolutionary, Hemchandra Ghose in 1901, Vivekananda had said, 'Read Bankimchandra and Bankimchandra,[sic!] and emulate his Desha Bhakti and Sanatana Dharma.' See Bhupendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda: Patriot-Prophet, A Study, Calcutta, 1954, p. 334.

in scriptural constructions, it was traditionally understood to be a stage or a choice available to the devout Hindu. But in the context of nineteenth-century Bengal the resonances of certain past events endowed the figure of the sannyasi with a dynamic relevance. What attracted Vivekananda in the first place to redraft significant dimensions of a received tradition is a question we need briefly to turn to before studying its wider implications.

Vivekananda, born Narendranath Datta was the son of Vishwanath Datta, a fairly successful attorney.<sup>23</sup> The Datta family of Simla, Calcutta, in fact, typified the transformations brought about in the life of the indigenous elite with installation of the colonial state apparatus. Vivekananda's 'family was Kayastha by caste with a long tradition of service under the Muslim rulers,' and 'was among the early recruits to the new professions created by colonial rule.'<sup>24</sup> Although Vivekananda's transformation into a seeker after spiritual perfection apparently came with his interaction with Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the family belief that the child was a reincarnation of his sannyasi grandfather, Durgaprasad, and also a gift of Shiva, may have already created the ground for his momentous decision to become an ascetic.<sup>25</sup> Most standard biographies of Vivekananda describe his final initiation by Ramakrishna in terms of his attraction to the state of spiritual ecstasy - the experience of samadhi. Ramakrishna's emphasis on Naren as his heir has been read largely in terms of a

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<sup>23</sup>S. N. Dhar, A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda, Vol I, Madras, 1975, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup>Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered, p. 221.

<sup>25</sup>See Dhar, A Comprehensive Biography, Vol I, pp. 14-17, Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered, pp. 238-9.

spiritual inheritance.<sup>26</sup> Narendranath's redrafting of the sannyasi icon following the death of the Master requires a serious reconsideration.

Entrusted with the responsibility to look after his brother-disciples by Ramakrishna, Vivekananda founded the first Math at Baranagore, financed by Ramakrishna's householder-disciple Surendranath Mitra. Despite hardships, the monks at the Baranagore spent a great deal of time in studying Kant, Hegel, Mill and Spencer as well as Hindu philosophy, the Bible and Buddhist literature.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the initiation of the monks was carried out according to 'scriptural injunctions', as Swami Abhedananda recalled in his unpublished autobiography. The initiation ceremony was performed in January 1887.

One day Narendra said, 'We shall take orders in accordance with the scriptural injunctions.' When I was consulted, I said, 'The Vedic sannyasa requires Viraja Homa.'... Viraja Homa was performed one day...in the shrine in front of the Master's slippers. Naren as our leader poured the oblation, and by the grace of the Lord I, after sanctifying the fire, went on reading out the Mantras for him; and the Lord made me utter the sacred formula for all to repeat. Niranjan, Naren, Shashi, Sharat, Rakhal, Sarada, Baburam and I poured oblations simultaneously in the Viraja Homa, and we became brother-disciples.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore although traditional ceremonies were observed by the earliest

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<sup>26</sup>According to an often quoted passage from Swami Nirvedananda's article, 'Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance' in The Cultural Heritage of India, 1956, rpt. Calcutta, 1975, Ramakrishna is known to have told Vivekananda few days before his death : 'Today I have given you my all, and now I am only a poor faquir possessing nothing. By this power you will do infinite good to the world.' p. 687.

<sup>27</sup>Swami Gambhirananda, History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Calcutta, 1957, p. 56. Vivekananda himself had translated Herbert Spencer's On Education into Bengali, although no copy survives. See Mahendranath Datta, Srimat Vivekananda Swamijir Jibaner Ghatanabali, Part II, Basanta Kumar Chattopadhyay (ed.), Calcutta, 1925, p. 176.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

Ramakrishna monks, in their training was reflected a conscious effort to incorporate both Western and Indian systems of understanding and organising experience. Perhaps this was a deepened perception of Ramakrishna's universalist dictum - 'Jata Mat Tata Path' ('There are as many paths as there are opinions'), but such an integration seemed inevitable because of the social background of the new initiates. As Tapan Raychaudhuri has pointed out:

though a vivid interest in the Hindu religious-spiritual heritage was very much a part of the Bengali intellectual concerns, in the nineteenth century the expression of this new religiosity was modally within the limits of a colonial middle class life-style. The social origins of the young men led by Vivekananda, ... were in no way different from those other well-known protagonists of the new enlightenment. Children of bureaucrats, men in the learned professions or zamindars, they were also products of the Western education dispensed in Bengal's schools and colleges.<sup>29</sup>

Their educated middle-class backgrounds made certain issues central even in their lives as renunciators. On the one hand, the choice of sannyas or asceticism was based on contemporary views of conjugality, and on the other, the type of masculinity such asceticism implied drew as much from indigenous notions as from Western ones.

The privileging of the sannyasi that took place within this reconstructed Hinduism was aided by the debates that focused on the debased customs of 'Hindu' marriages. The various reforms around marriage - the Age of Consent debates, the Restitution of Conjugal Rights and the Marriage of Widows - had focussed on the 'barbaric' practices of the Hindus and thrown up questions about the nature of the

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<sup>29</sup>Raychaudhuri, Europe Reconsidered, p. 219.

conjugalities such unions encouraged.<sup>30</sup> As we have seen in Chapter III, current scholarship has taken note of issues related to conjugality. However, what has been inadequately noted is the concern with physical weakness. Anxiety about this was articulated specifically about practices that were designated as racially weakening. A report in the Somaprakash of August-September 1884, illustrates this. The report titled 'Amader Jubakganer Ekhan Kartabya Ki?' ('What are the present duties of the Youth of our Country?') focussed on the need to cultivate bodily strength.

The main obstacle on the path of our bodily improvement is the practice of child marriage. A fragile seed is incapable of sprouting into a mature tree. This is not its only adverse result. If one marries early, then one is burdened with a number of children within a space of a few years. Nor are these children well looked after. As a result they soon become emaciated and weak and disgrace the whole country.<sup>31</sup>

The 'emaciated and weak' Bengali - a disgrace to the whole nation - was a frequently deployed colonial notion. The indigenous reception of what was designated as a physical problem by the colonisers was often ambiguous. One aspect of this reception was to read it in terms of a spiritual problem, transforming the sannyasi-figure into a spiritual hero and so exonerating him from charges of effeminacy. Against these anxieties, the notion of sannyas aided in deflecting attention away from 'barbaric'

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<sup>30</sup>Mrinalini Sinha has drawn particular attention to the way in which the Victorian concept of masculinity shaped policy debates. See Mrinalini Sinha, 'Manliness: A Victorian ideal & Colonial Policy in the late Nineteenth Century Bengal', Ph.D dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1988. I am looking at the implications such debates had for a nationalist Hindu identity. The role of an alternative masculinity in the effort to empower a dominated indigenous culture needs a serious consideration.

<sup>31</sup>Somaprakash, August-September, 1884, in Benoy Ghose ed., Samayik Patre Bamlar Samaj Citra 1840-1905, ('The Picture of Bengali Society from Journals and Newspapers'), Calcutta, 1966, p. 317.

marital practices towards a disciplined masculinity, which far from being passive, was conceptualised as an active living force. Moreover, the choice of celibacy promised an escape from the guilt and uneasiness that underlay marriage. In nineteenth-century Bengal, anxiety about mismatched conjugality, was especially a problem for the educated bhadralok. With their exposure to Western learning, their expectations of their uninitiated child-wives were disproportionately high. Perceiving themselves as leaders in a cultural revolt, they often looked upon incompatibility in marriage as waste of time and energy.<sup>32</sup>

The Hindu notion of conjugality, which we have examined in some detail in the last chapter, therefore held no hope and became sublimated in the desire for celibacy. As his disciple Nivedita put it, 'The institution of marriage ... was always seen by him in its relation to the ideal of spiritual freedom. And freedom, in the Eastern sense, must be understood, not as the right to do, but the right to refrain from doing - that highest in action that transcends all actions.'<sup>33</sup> The ideal of spiritual freedom, then, let the individual rise beyond marriage. Vivekananda clarified this connection between celibacy and strength, in terms of discipline. In a letter written from America to his disciple Alasinga, while emphasising the need for strong men, he defined the truly strong in terms of their capacity for renunciation as well as in

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<sup>32</sup>In a similarly pressured context, an aspect of this anxiety is seen as expressing itself in the cultural disease of dhatu loss in Sri Lanka as studied by Gananatha Obeyesekere. See Ganannatha Obeyesekere, 'The Impact of Ayurvedic Ideas on the Culture and Individual in Sri Lanka' in Charles Leslie (ed.), Asian Medical Systems: A Comparative Study, Berkeley, 1976, p. 213.

<sup>33</sup>Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, The Master as I Saw Him: Being Pages From the Life of the Swami Vivekananda, London, 1910, p. 414.

terms of celibacy. Though he saw 'Madrasis' as capable of carrying out this project, he regretted that 'every fool is married'. The stress on celibacy was further consolidated by his ideas about the 'diabolical custom' of child marriage.<sup>34</sup> The letter to Alasinga continues:

Strength, manhood, Kshatra-Virya + Brahma-Teja. Our beautiful hopeful boys - they have everything, only if they are not slaughtered by the millions at the altar of this brutality they call marriage ... Madras will then awake when ... educated young men will stand aside from the world, gird their loins, and be ready to fight the battle of truth, marching from nation to nation.<sup>35</sup>

Asceticism in this sense, therefore, sought to combine the strength of the Kshatriya - which the historical consciousness had identified in the Rajputs and Marathas - with the potency of knowledge or Brahman. The 'manliness' of the West was not totally equated with the virility of the Kshatriya. The militant Rajputs were also the Kshatriyas traditionally the warriors within the four varnas. They were further transformed into the essential complement of the brahminical principle of asceticism. The reconstructed sannyasi had to balance the active, passionate masculinity of the Kshatriya, with the sterner and self-denying aspects of the brahminical asceticism.<sup>36</sup> Yet, this delicate balancing act was not the privilege of the Hindu alone but of anyone capable of disciplining himself. Although there is a marked dissimilarity between his lectures abroad and his speeches in India, an attempt at universalising Hinduism

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<sup>34</sup>See letter to Saradananda, 23 Dec 1895, CWSV, Vol. VIII, p. 365.

<sup>35</sup>CWSV, Vol. V, p.117.

<sup>36</sup>Vivekananda's reinterpretation is especially significant because caste remained an important marker in the contemporary understanding of this institution. After Vivekananda's death, an obituary in Nabha Bharat, noted that by initiating a Kayastha Ramakrishna had gone beyond the prescriptions of the Shastras, however, it observed that once initiated a sannyasi transcends caste barriers. Nabha Bharat, Vol I: 11-12, May-June 1902, p. 299.



remained an integral part of Vivekananda's articulations about the nature of Hinduism.

### **Universal Hinduism and the Sannyasi**

The World Parliament of Religions, which had brought Vivekananda into the limelight was in fact a part of the Columbian Exposition of 1893. The environment of the Exposition intermingled man's material progress with achievements of a non-material nature that had helped the progress of his spirit - viz., literature, art, the political awareness of rights of individuals and more generally, knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Vivekananda, who had arrived in Chicago, on 28 July 1893, had spent a considerable amount of time at the Exposition as the Parliament of Religions did not begin until 11 September. The Exposition, together with what he perceived as the 'spirit of America', came to define his unique understanding of Western masculinity. What impressed him most about Americans, according to his Eastern and Western disciples, was their capacity for hard work : 'Here you have a most wonderful manifestation of grit and power - what strength, what practicality, what manhood.'<sup>38</sup>

Vivekananda's role in this particular celebration of Western manliness as an off-shoot of material progress and prosperity was to interrogate this notion of manhood and emphasise the need for a different kind of strength - that of the spirit.

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<sup>37</sup>See Rev. John Henry Barrows (ed.), An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893, Vols. I & II, Chicago, 1893.

<sup>38</sup>Swami Vivekananda, Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Admirers, quoted in S.N. Dhar A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda, p. 437.

At the Parliament he identified himself as a representative of the most ancient religion: 'I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.'<sup>39</sup> This historicising aided in reconstructing the Ramakrishna Brotherhood of monks founded in 1887 as representing an age-old Hindu tradition at the same time creating for Vivekananda a space from which to critique the materialistic West.

The West's obsession with the material and physical aspects of human life had focused Vivekananda's attention on the 'false' worship of Shakti or Power that made him reformulate Hinduism as a remedy for the ills of Western society. In a letter to Shivananda, written in 1894, he commented on the American lack of understanding about the spiritual significance of Shakti - essentialised in the Indian worship of the Mother:

What do I find in America and Europe? - the worship of Shakti, the worship of Power. Yet they worship her ignorantly through sense-gratification. Imagine, then what a lot of good they will achieve who will worship her in all purity, in a Sattvika spirit, looking upon Her as their mother!<sup>40</sup>

Just as the Western worship of Shakti was a depraved understanding of its true nature, the West's religiosity was also flawed. This remained a concern during both his visits abroad. In 1900, lecturing at Pasadena on 'Universal Religion: Its Realisation', he emphasised Hinduism's acceptance of different creeds as one of its defining qualities:

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<sup>39</sup>CWSV, Vol I,p.3.

<sup>40</sup>Letter to Shivananda, translated text, CWSV, Vol VII, p. 484.

I shall go to the mosque of the Mohamedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in the Buddha and his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one.<sup>41</sup>

During his visits abroad, his primary concern seemed to be to demonstrate the universal religious principles that underlay the precepts of Hinduism. In this Vivekananda took his master's maxim - jata mat tata path further. By rationalising this axiom as containing an intrinsic truth about the harmonious coexistence of innumerable notions of the divine within Hinduism, Vivekananda ruled out proselytising as a requirement. It was in terms of a non-proselytising faith that the superiority of Hinduism was proclaimed. In an interview given in London to the Sunday Times in 1896, Vivekananda had focused on Hinduism's conquering spirit:

It was India's Karma, her fate to be conquered and in her turn, to conquer her conqueror. She has already done so with her Mohamedan victors: educated Mohamedans are sufis, scarcely to be distinguished from Hindus. Hindu thought has permeated their civilisation; they assumed the position of learners. The great Akbar, the Moghul Emperor, was practically a Hindu. And England will be conquered in her turn. Today she has the sword, but it is worse than useless in the world of ideas.<sup>42</sup>

The notion of the effusion of a conquering faith from India located Hinduism as the universal faith of which the world was in need. Vivekananda's interesting comparison of Hinduism with Islam and Christianity erased the difference in approach these belief-systems might have, and fitted them into a structure of comprehension that was essentially Hindu.

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<sup>41</sup>CWSV, Vol II, p. 374.

<sup>42</sup>CWSV, Vol V, p. 190.

While, scholars have hinted at the contributions of missionary thought to such 'Neo-Hindu' articulations,<sup>43</sup> inadequate attention has been paid to the impact of such statements on the missionaries themselves. After Vivekananda's repeated pronouncements on universal and tolerant Hinduism at the World Parliament of Religions, and during his stay in America, missionary discourse in India forged a different evangelising strategy. T.E. Slater, a veteran missionary of the London Missionary Society warned in 1899 about indigenous attempts at reviving ancient tradition in terms of 'reading Christianity into Hinduism'.<sup>44</sup> It was the oppositional self-descriptive Hindu discourse that was beginning to present itself as a problem to missionaries. What seemed the most difficult aspect of this contending discourse to the missionaries was the elusive nature of this discursive formation which claimed even Jesus Christ as one of its avatars and asserted an all-embracing tolerance. Arguing against such subtle schemes, the Rev. John Robson expounded intolerance as a strategy:

Twenty years ago, I insisted on Intolerance as a primary requisite in the propagation of Christianity in India, and I am now more than ever convinced of its necessity. I purposely use this word for it is with this that Hindus

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<sup>43</sup>D.H. Killingley, wrote in 1984: 'The missionaries together with others, promoted in Bengal a whole range of western ideas...By assimilating these ideas and including them in their Hinduism, Bengali Hindu writers developed a neo-Hinduism, which could claim to be compatible with Western thought and at the same time go beyond it.' 'The Hindu response to Christian Missionaries in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in Kenneth Ballhatchet and David Taylor (eds.), Changing South Asia: Religion and society, London, 1984, p. 115.

<sup>44</sup>T. E. Slater, The Higher Hinduism in Relation to Christianity: Certain Aspects of Hindu Thought from the Christian Standpoint, London, 1902, p. 22. This essay written in 1899, was submitted to the Saxon Missionary Conference for a missionary prize essay, which incidently it failed to secure. Interestingly, the Introduction to the book was written by the Rev. John Henry Barrows, one of the Organisers of the Chicago Parliament of Religions.

reproach Christianity, and to it they oppose the large toleration which Hinduism teaches. And if Christianity once becomes tolerant as Hinduism is, it falls vanquished.<sup>45</sup>

The changing missionary discourse reveals for us the pressures exerted on it by the authoritative self-descriptive Hindu discourse in the nineteenth century that was beginning to interpret itself in universalist terms. Vivekananda was one of the most articulate authors of this aspect of the Hindu discourse. But the assertiveness which originated in the delineation of Hinduism as an universal religion, also gave strength and direction to nationalist self-descriptions in certain specific ways. The identity that was being formulated by the articulate middle class for itself was entangled in a complex way with notions of gender. As we have seen in Chapter III, one of the primary concerns of nationalism was with the icon of heroic motherhood. In Vivekananda's schema, heroism was defined in spiritual terms and the role he envisaged for women played a crucial role in the unfolding of this self-descriptive Hindu discourse.

### **Spiritual Heroism and Hindu Womanhood**

While Vivekananda was extremely critical of traditional Hindu social practices that exploited women, he was reluctant to admit these customs before his American audience. Therefore what emerges from his lectures in America is glorified motherhood as a marker for Hindu womanhood. In all his lectures abroad during the

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<sup>45</sup>John Robson, Hinduism and Its Relation to Christianity, Edinburgh, 1893, p. 244.

first phase (1893-97) and the second (1899-1900), the family was perceived as a site of control. Vivekananda diverted attention away from this apparatus of patriarchy which has been used to consolidate male power, by describing it as being a woman's area of control with the powerful matriarch at the head of the household. His famous lecture 'Women of India' was in fact delivered extempore at the request of a member of the audience at the Shakespeare Club, Pasadena, on 18 January 1900. He began with an apology because he belonged to an order of celibate monks - 'so my knowledge of women in all their relations, as mother, as wife, as daughter, as sister, must necessarily not be so complete as it may be with other men'.<sup>46</sup> Having substantiated the nature of his limitations, he asserted that he would point out what comprises the ideal, for 'in each nation, man or woman represents an ideal consciously or unconsciously being worked out.'<sup>47</sup> Thus deploying a frequent strategy of the Hindu discourse - representing the ideal in preference to the real. His formulations were finally not very different from the ideals of Hindu womanhood which we have considered in Chapter III, which is 'the mother, the mother first, and the mother last...To the ordinary man in India, the whole force of womanhood is concentrated in motherhood.'<sup>48</sup>

Although Vivekananda's construction of a particular type of motherhood operated within certain codes that were set by the Bengali middle-class patriarchy, the

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<sup>46</sup>CWSV, Vol VIII,p.54.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.,p.55.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.,p.57.

'mechanism of constraint' (to borrow a term from Foucault<sup>49</sup>), that endeavoured to enforce such a 'norm' in a foreign country is of particular interest here. The conflicts he had with the Ramabai Circle in Boston and Brooklyn between 1893-4 would perhaps explain one of the aspects of the mechanism of constraint that operated on his discourse.

In a letter to Alasinga, written from Breezy Meadows, Metcalfe, Massachussetts, dated 20 August 1893, he mentions an invitation 'to speak at a big Ladies Club here, which is helping Ramabai.'<sup>50</sup> There is, however, no existing report of this particular lecture; but the subsequent developments in the Brooklyn Ramabai circle, reveals that Vivekananda's optimistic depiction of child widows in India came in for severe criticism. In a later lecture titled 'Ideals of Indian Womanhood - Hindu, Mohammedan, and Christian given on 20 January 1895, Vivekananda was silent about the fate of the child widows in India, much to the fury of the Ramabai circle in Brooklyn. A contemporary newspaper the Daily Eagle, reported:

Much interest was manifested on account of the denial by Mrs. James McKeen, president of the Brooklyn Ramabai Circle, which is interested in Christian work in India, of the statement attributed to the lecture that the child widows of India were not protected (ill-treated). In no part of his lecture was reference made to this denial, but after he had concluded, one of the audience asked the lecturer what explanation he had to make to the statement, Swami Vivekananda said that it was untrue that child widows were abused or ill-

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<sup>49</sup>Foucault used the term to depict the ways in which discursive norms fix a conceptual terrain so that it becomes impossible to think outside them. See Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', Inaugural Lecture given at the College de France, given 2 December 1970, translated Geoff Bennigton and Ian Mcleod, reprinted in Robert Young (ed.), Untying the Text: A Post Structuralist Reader, Boston, 1981, pp. 48-78.

<sup>50</sup>CWSV, Vol V, pp.17-8.

treated in any way.<sup>51</sup>

According to Marie Louise Burke, who has compiled American newspaper reports during Vivekananda's visit to America, the missionary propaganda that confronted Vivekananda in the 1890s in America played upon the 'savagery' and 'superstitions' that constituted the Hindu way of life. Burke provides us with some contemporary line drawings from such missionary pamphlets, illustrating notably 'The Heathen Mother', 'A Man Burning His Wife', and 'Saugor Island'. The last comes with the explanation: 'This island is inhabited only by wild beasts. Here thousands of Hindu mothers have thrown their children into the Ganges to be devoured by the alligators.'<sup>52</sup> Burke also quotes a poem from a Missionary booklet titled 'Songs for the Little Ones at Home':

See the Heathen Mother stand  
Where the sacred current flows;  
With her own maternal hand  
Mid the waves her babes she throws.

After describing the despicable act with horror the poem suggests the only logical solution:

Send, oh send the Bible there,  
Let its precepts reach the heart:  
She may then her children spare  
Act the tender mother's part.<sup>53</sup>

The missionary construction of a heathen mother operated as a constraint in Foucault's sense of the term on Vivekananda's statements about motherhood. His

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<sup>51</sup>Report quoted in CWSV, Vol II, p. 514.

<sup>52</sup>Marie Louise Burke, Vivekananda in America : New Discoveries, pp. 130-1.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.,p.131.



silences, in this particular context, seem indicative of a power-laden encounter and for us, an indicator of the complex nature of knowledge within self-representation. In other words, at one end of this spectrum of self-representation, was Ramabai and her own understanding as a widow of the position of the widow within Hindu society, while at the other stood Vivekananda with his refusal to recognise this experience. In the controversial lecture of 20 January 1895, after taking pains to establish that women in India embody the ideals of purity set down in the Vedas, he went on to assert that the social situation was not adverse at all:

In India woman has enjoyed property rights since thousands of years. Here a man may disinherit his wife, in India, the whole estate of the deceased husband must go to the wife.<sup>54</sup>

Vivekananda insisted that the people of India 'do not burn women, nor have they ever burnt witches'<sup>55</sup> This reference to 'witch-hunt' of Salem of 1692, brought forth cheers from the audience as a disciple, Mrs Funke recounted, for 'an American audience enjoys a joke on itself.'<sup>56</sup> The diversion was also a part of the strategy of grappling with the 'Hindu' identity and its undesirable components. Vivekananda construed Ramabai's activities as ultimately strengthening the hands of the missionaries, and his 'silences' as well as contrary assertions form an essential part of his efforts at validating a Hindu identity. Interestingly, in an effort to attest that he was not opposed to the education of widows, if it were carried out without missionary support, he donated the proceeds of his last lecture at Brooklyn, entitled 'Some

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<sup>54</sup>CWSV, Vol II, p. 506.

<sup>55</sup>S.N.Dhar, A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda, I, p. 560.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

Customs of the Hindus: What they Mean and How they are Misinterpreted' on 7 April 1896, in aid of Babu Sashipada Banerjee's Boarding School for Hindu Widows.<sup>57</sup>

Although the 'R-controversy' as he came to call it in his letters, seemed to subside after some time, he never confronted Ramabai's criticism of Hindu society which she had published in 1886. Her book, High Caste Hindu Woman, written to raise funds for her widows home in India, sold 10,000 copies in America within a short while of its publication.<sup>58</sup> However, an oblique reference to Pandita Ramabai in 1899, reveal the ways in which Vivekananda was still trying to resolve the controversy. In a letter to Sarala Debi Ghosal, whose contributions we have discussed in the context of heroism and gender, he pronounced that the west need to be exposed to women like her 'whose education has been 'perfect'.<sup>59</sup> After his death, Sarala published his letter in her journal Bharati. This letter dated 24 April 1897, written from Darjeeling, revealed his anxiety about women who stood outside the tradition of Hindu spiritual heroism, for, except for the fact that Ramabai had converted to Christianity, she seemed to match the qualities the Hindu discourse had set up as its ideals. Ramabai was educated traditionally, had brought up her daughter by herself and had succeeded in setting up her own charitable home for widows. Vivekananda ignored these aspects, emphasising that what the West needed to see was an Indian woman bring to them the teachings of India's saints. Needless to say, this 'Indianness'

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<sup>57</sup>Dhar, p. 689.

<sup>58</sup>Sister Geraldine comp., The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita, Bombay, 1977, p. xx, cited in Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women, p. 68.

<sup>59</sup>Sarala Debi, Jibaner Jharapata (The Fallen Leaves of Life), Calcutta, 1957, p. 161.

was defined in terms of Hindu concepts, an indirect criticism of Ramabai's conversion to Christianity:

The only woman who went over from our country was Ramabai; her knowledge of English, Western science and art was limited. If any one like you should go, England will be stirred, what to speak of America! If an Indian woman in Indian dress preach the religion which fell from the lips of the Rishis of India - I see a prophetic vision - there will rise a great wave which will inundate the whole Western world.<sup>60</sup>

We shall look at the nationalist festivals designed by Sarala Debi in greater detail in the next chapter. Sarala Debi's 'perfect' education enabled her to function within acceptable patriarchal Hindu norms and Vivekananda's hopes clearly lay in that direction rather than Ramabai's.

Despite his delineation of the ideals of Hindu womanhood, a constant tension can be discerned in his 'man-making' project. This tension stressed the polarities of glorious manliness and weak womanliness equated with eunuchs. Writing to Alasinga in 1895, he voiced his impatience with his disciples' inability to deal with missionary criticism: 'So long as you shriek at the missionary attempts and jump without being able to do anything, I laugh at you; you are little dollies, that is what you are...I know, my son, I shall have to come and manufacture men out of you. I know that India is only inhabited by women and eunuchs.'<sup>61</sup>

The tension between India's glorious womanhood which he constantly refers to and the despicable quality of 'womanliness' remained unresolved even in his

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<sup>60</sup>Bharati, August-September 1902, p. 495. Translated letter appears in Letters of Swami Vivekananda, Calcutta, 1960, p. 395.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

formulation of rules and regulations for intending monks in his order. While it seems, from his letter to fellow-disciples at the Alambazar Math written in April 1896, that he includes within his plans the establishment of a woman's math, in the section titled 'Some General Remarks' he says:

1. If any woman comes to have a talk with a Sannyasin, she should do it in the Visitor's Hall. No woman shall be allowed to enter any other room - except the Worship-room
2. No Sannyasin shall be allowed to reside in the Women's Math. Anyone refusing to obey this rule shall be expelled from the Math. 'Better an empty fold than a wicked herd.'<sup>62</sup>

This disjuncture between the spiritual power of the feminine principle, where 'woman-power' is equated with patience and endurance in the path of renunciation, and the actual presence of women in the Math related to the choice of asceticism that was given within this schema to a male initiate, was also a consequence of the impossibility of 'feminising' the discourse from without. In this Vivekananda stood in sharp contrast to his guru Ramakrishna's attempts at feminisation, even if in Ramakrishna's vocabulary the shunning of women is likened to and justified in terms of the shunning of wealth. Sumit Sarkar in his study of Ramakrishna, has pointed out the paradox between Ramakrishna's condemnation of any contact between sannyasis and women and his advise to his disciples 'to conquer lust by behaving like a woman.'<sup>63</sup> If the paradox remained unresolved in Ramakrishna, Vivekananda sought to resolve it through a recuperation of the notion of heroic femininity within a 'virile'

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<sup>62</sup>CWSV, Vol VII, p.495.

<sup>63</sup>Ramakrishna Paramahansa, 25 February 1885, Kathamrita, Vol V (1902, 1904, 1908, 1910 & 1932 rpt., Calcutta 1980-82), p.140 quoted in Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kathamrita as Text', p. 105.

religion which harmonised with his expectations of women-disciples, identifying some of the women-disciples of Ramakrishna as the bearers of an unbroken Hindu tradition. A letter to his 'brother-disciples' demonstrates this: 'It won't do merely to call Shri Ramakrishna as [an] Incarnation, you must manifest power. Where are Gour-Ma, Yogin-Ma, and Golap-Ma? Tell them to spread these ideas'.<sup>64</sup>

The reference to Ramakrishna's women disciples - always referred to as mothers - stresses the importance of mothers in the 'manifestation of power'. This stress on powerful mother-figures who would inspire by their heroic presence, was another strand of the reconstructed Hindu discourse, taken up and developed within the nationalist self-perception.

### **Asceticism and Nationalism**

The significant role attributed to Vivekananda in the Swadeshi movement in Bengal by scholars has been presented mainly in terms of his influence on Swadeshi activists. Leonard Gordon in his study of the nationalist movement in Bengal, sees the twin influences of Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as charting out a specific role for the youth of Bengal.<sup>65</sup> However, the political dimensions of Bankim's or Vivekananda's ideas were hardly perceived as straight-forward signifiers by the youth of Bengal. By not analysing the basis of Vivekananda's appeal, Gordon assumes the

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<sup>64</sup>CWSV, Vol VI, p. 267.

<sup>65</sup>Leonard A.Gordon, Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940, New York, 1974, p. 79.

existence of a political programme which was actually not there. To understand the politicisation of a discourse that was primarily about cultural identity, we need to look at the existing network of ideas that Vivekananda drew upon. Asceticism and its political dimensions formed one such complex structure.

While Orientalist discourse had linked abnegation and asceticism,<sup>66</sup> for Vivekananda asceticism signified a heightened spirituality that emanated from the disciplining of the dhatu. Celibacy, implied the containment of birya - the semen, and its loss was perceived in Ayurvedic terms to be enervating and weakening. Vivekananda's equation of celibacy and strength, therefore shared a continuity with the prevalent Hindu notion that biryapat or ejaculation actually weakened the male. The word birya in Bengali also connotes bravery, courage, splendour, strength as well as the semen which contains the seed of procreation. Apart from its linguistic range, there is also the tradition of associating semen with vitality and strength. Within this context, the strength of the sannyasi is seen as emanating from his state of celibacy. That the leadership that the middle class envisaged for itself was perceived as compatible with the notion of sannyas, is borne out, as we shall see, by the middle-class following of Ramakrishna Paramahansa as well as latter-day Swadeshi activists. What lay at the heart of this alternative manliness that was being drafted was a serious interrogation of the notion of masculinity within the setting of colonial scepticism about its existence among the Bengali Hindus. The synthesis of a reformulated masculinity in terms of the rigour implied by asceticism or sannyas, denoted a heroic

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<sup>66</sup>John Campbell Oman, The Mystics, Ascetics and Saints of India, p. 15.

capacity to bear hardships and undertake penance, but the integration of the notion of sacrifice as a service to the motherland - endowed this figure with an increased resonance in contemporary Bengal.

In his study of Ramakrishna, Sumit Sarkar has elaborated upon Ramakrishna's view that biryapat enervates the male while continence in the midst of temptation is a potent source of spiritual energy.

Ramakrishna stood four-square within this tradition when he condemned repeatedly any contact between sannyasis and women: they must not see pictures of the latter, or come near them physically in any way ... The standard is naturally different for householders ... but they too were urged by Ramakrishna to abstain from intercourse after one or two children, and to live henceforward as brothers and sisters <sup>67</sup>

Vivekananda stood within the same basic premise, but infused celibacy with a different meaning. According to him the 'new' manliness sketched in figure of the sannyasi had to incorporate a more desirable form of Western masculinity. His observations about America's material wealth - 'That city [New York] is the head, hand and purse of the country'<sup>68</sup> - need to be read in conjunction with his comments on the care of the body that Westerners stress through their sense of decorum - 'Just as we always dwell on the soul, so they take care of the body, and there is no end to the cleaning and embellishing of it. One who fails to do this has no place in society.'<sup>69</sup> If this characterised the Western obsession with body, Vivekananda posited the spiritual disciplining of the body as an essential part of the superiority of

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<sup>67</sup>Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kathamrita as a Text', pp. 99-100.

<sup>68</sup>Letter to Alasinga, dated 21 September, 1894, in CWSV, Vol.V, p.44.

<sup>69</sup>Letter to Manmath Nath Bhattacharya, translated text, 5 September 1894, CWSV, Vol VII, p. 471.

Hinduism. In formulating this he drew upon the received Hindu equation of strength with celibacy. Sannyas in its redefinition did not imply a denial of sexual energy on account of continence but rather a concentration of this energy through a preservation of the vital fluid that is analogous to cosmic energy - the semen. Vivekananda in Six Lessons on Raja-Yoga, a series of talks given around 1896, spoke of the transformation of the baser forms of energy into spiritual energy that could share with Cosmic energy in the regeneration of the world:

The great sexual force, raised from animal action and sent upward to the great dynamo of the human system, the brain, and there stored up, becomes Ojas or spiritual force...This Ojas is the real man and in human beings alone is it possible for this storage of Ojas to be accomplished. One in whom the whole animal sex force has been transformed into Ojas is a god. He speaks with power, and his words regenerate the world.<sup>70</sup>

It was this transformation of sexual energy that informed the heroism contained in the figure of the sannyasi. As Elisabeth Haich has pointed out, 'as soon as he ceases to expend sexual energy, retaining it as a living fuel for himself, in order to stimulate and activate his nerve [centres] ... he attains mastery over the spiritual-magical powers and obtains the goal of his life, all consciousness in God.'<sup>71</sup> But in order to historicise Vivekananda's stress on the transformation necessary in the practice of Raja Yoga, we have to look at the context within which he functioned more closely.

Vivekananda was, in fact, incorporating notions that lay beyond the scope of Hindu definitions. The vulnerability of the flesh, which defines the austere bodily

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<sup>70</sup>CWSV, Vol. VIII, p.46.

<sup>71</sup>Elisabeth Haich, Sexual Energy and Yoga, London, 1972, pp. 157-8.



discipline of the Christian faith, was taken into account within Vivekananda's reconstruction. Characteristically, Vivekananda deployed the counter-notion of the Ojas or spiritual power without setting up an oppositional notion of an impervious human will. The very fact that this spiritual power was not perceived as a stasis but as a movement towards an equilibrium between the cosmic power and the power within indicated the frailty of the flesh that had to be conquered.

Related to this transformation of sexuality and the articulation of difference with reference to sannyas, is the delineation of the role assigned to the householder. According to definitions in traditional Hindu texts - the Markandeya Purana and the Kurma Purana - within the various ashramas or stages of life there are numerous subdivisions. Within these, the state of brahmacharya and the state of the vanaprastha are similar to sannyas in that both are devoid of the regular joys and responsibilities of the householder.<sup>72</sup> The latter denoting a state of celibacy within marriage. Taking these given notions, the nineteenth-century Hindu discourse, through Vivekananda's articulation of it, privileged certain notions over the others. It is the image of sannyasi which generated influential resonances in contemporary Bengal and later in the context of the Swadeshi Movement. The confrontation with the received image of the sannyasi as an ascetic detached from the world was recast. In Vivekananda's speeches and writings there was a conflation of meaning between sannyasi, sage and priest - as all these figures were visualised as bearing India's spiritual tradition. A return to the core of this tradition would lead to what was defined as 'progress' in his terms. Indeed, his

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<sup>72</sup> See Sadashiv A. Dange, Encyclopedia of Puranic Beliefs and Practices, Vol. I, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 50-4.

message was read in these terms by the Swadeshi activists of Bengal. His celebrated

Lectures from Colombo to Almora held up this alternative masculinity as an ideal:

The Sannyasin, as you all know, is the ideal of the Hindu's life, and every one by our shastras is compelled to give up ... Therefore my friends, the way out is that first and foremost we must keep a firm hold of spirituality - that inestimable gift handed down to us by our ancient forefathers. Did you ever hear of a country where the greatest kings tried to trace their descent not to kings, not to robber-barons living in old castles who plundered poor travellers, but to semi-naked sages who lived in the forest? ... This is the land ... Therefore, whether you believe in spirituality or not, for the sake of the national life, you have to get a hold of spirituality and keep to it.<sup>73</sup>

The sannyasi then became in Vivekananda's representation a bearer of a distinguishing culture - the culture of spirituality - and therefore could generate the energy to deliver the nation from its present degenerate state. Moreover, adherence to this path required strict self-discipline and celibacy was perceived as an intrinsic part of that discipline. His main project thus often came to be identified as a 'man-making mission'.

Vivekananda's 'man-making mission' has been studied in psycho-analytical terms by Sudhir Kakar. Kakar sees in Vivekananda's life the 'struggle to free himself from his mother and the advocacy of a thoroughly masculine courage and initiative' that 'manifested itself in his historic mission to infuse Indian nationalism with a militant revival of tradition, to bring resolute manly activity and radical social transformation to that 'nation of women' as he characterised the India of his time'.<sup>74</sup>

Kakar reads Vivekananda's obsession with manliness in terms of an unresolved

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<sup>73</sup>CWSV, Vol. III, pp.150-3.

<sup>74</sup>Sudhir Kakar, The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India, New Delhi, 2nd edition, 1981, p. 170.

personal conflict about his own individuation as a man.<sup>75</sup> Such psycho-analytical studies of individuals, however insightful, are inadequate tools for placing Vivekananda within the context of the nineteenth-century anxiety about manliness and its lack in the national life. The historical location of such allegations and their reception by the middle-class intelligentsia who were struggling to define themselves within the colonial context, places the problem of masculinity in an arena larger than the individual mind. The British representation of the Indian as weak and effeminate, made femininity into a negative metaphor. It was with reference to this undesirable feminisation of the male that the heroic ascetic-figure was constructed. The issue central to the rejoinder to charges of being emasculated even when shrouded in metaphysical rhetoric was masculinity. Opposition was articulated through this particular notion of male-ness because it was the area which stood affronted. Within this discourse of heroic masculine asceticism, women were perceived as inspirational figures rather than actual participants, except for the unusual examples of Sister Nivedita or Sarala Debi before her marriage. Both these women were distinguished for having transcended their sexuality, and Sarala Debi's marriage was viewed as a loss to nationalism.<sup>76</sup>

The nationalist self-definition of an alternative masculinity negotiated the colonial definition of what constituted 'Indian'. An ambivalent attitude marked the attitude towards the virile English rulers - some aspects of that virility needed to be

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., pp.174-6.

<sup>76</sup> See Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, Jibaner Jhara Pata, p. 186.

emulated even as a return to indigenous modes of asserting the masculine were recommended. The causes of deterioration of the indigenous Hindu population were seen to be directly linked with the spread of Western civilisation, as the Sulabh Dainik noted with reference to the Census of 1891:

The salutary practices enjoined by the Rishis for the preservation of the health of the body and mind are now little observed. And to crown the whole, there is now a dearth of food in the country owing to an unnatural system of trade.<sup>77</sup>

If Western civilisation was identified with power, there was also an awareness of its negative aspects - power that consolidated itself at the expense of the indigenous people. The oppositional masculinity then was designed to resist this unfeeling and insensitive virility exemplified by the colonisers. This not only concerted with the authorisation of a different masculinity in the image of the sannyasi, but also set free the inherent power of youth needlessly sacrificed at the altar of child-marriage. In this drafting of a 'useful' masculinity through sannyas, the householder disciples whom Ramakrishna had initiated and included in the fold, were to be excluded. 'We want', said Vivekananda to his 'brother-disciples at the Alam Bazar Math in 1894, 'two thousand Sannyasins, nay ten, or even twenty thousand ... Not householder disciples, mind you, we want Sannyasins.'<sup>78</sup> The redefined masculinity then, in its very movement towards celibacy signalled a movement away from a meaningless conjugality. What was extremely significant in this context was the choice of a guaranteed potentiality that could be achieved through celibacy over the debatable

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<sup>77</sup>Sulabh Dainik, 22 May 1893, in RNP, No.21 of 1893, p.427.

<sup>78</sup>CWSV, Vol. VI, p.293.

venture of marriage. Therefore, Vivekananda's insistence on a different manliness was linked on the one hand to this equation of manhood and power and on the other with an alternative maleness that took its meaning from the worship of Shakti, embodied by a Mother Goddess. The devoted nationalist sannyasi - later elucidated by Aurobindo and other Swadeshi activists - was dedicated to liberating the Mother Country. Vivekananda's reconstruction of this alternative masculinity, powerfully redirected the purpose of spirituality within Hindu religious norms. By contextualising Vivekananda's reconstruction of the sannyasi icon within the self-defining Hindu discourse that was evolving in nineteenth-century Bengal, it becomes possible to mark the aspects of this important icon that appealed to the nationalist imagination.

The equation of spirituality and strength that was consolidated within the sannyasi icon was not the only aspect of its appeal. The definition of asceticism and its message had wider implications within the contemporary context. Vivekananda's physical presence also contributed considerably to the anchoring of the sannyasi icon. Vivekananda's participation in the World Parliament of Religions was seen by himself as well as his sponsor, the Maharaja of Khetri, as an exercise in designing difference in terms of dress. Indeed as we shall see, the question of how to dress in a manner that would symbolise cultural difference had become in Vivekananda's time an important question.

Therefore, the question of dress was a significant one in the light of the representative nature of participation in the Parliament as a Hindu monk. S.N. Dhar tells us in the Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda that silk alkhallas

were purchased for him by the Munshi of Khetri.<sup>79</sup> However, later, he had to adapt his dress to make the cold weather bearable. Even as he did this, he took particular care to acquire the right colour of cloth for his coat.<sup>80</sup> The right colour in this case was gerua - or saffron - the accepted colour of renunciation in the Hindu tradition. That he considered this especially important, is borne out by the fact that when he summoned Swami Abhedananda to join him, in 1895, he instructed him about the colour and style of the attire: 'Gangadhar's Tibetan choga is in the Math; get the tailor to make a similar choga of gerua colour.'<sup>81</sup>

The emphasis on the colour and the style of the dress was particularly significant for the creation of the icon. The image of the sannyasi thus compressed within itself its inherent spiritual abstractions and represented them in an intelligible form. This important icon fashioned into a recognisable symbol of renunciation also became imbued with nationalist significance in its efforts to look distinguishably 'Indian'. In this it was spliced with the debates around 'dress' in the 1880s, when the wearing of European dress by 'natives' was enmeshed in notions of honour and dishonour.<sup>82</sup> Vivekananda's participation in such debates was demonstrated by his

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<sup>79</sup>S.N. Dhar, A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda, I, p. 392.

<sup>80</sup>See letter to Miss Mary Hale: 'By very good luck, I have found the orange cloth and am going to have a coat made as soon as I can.' CWSV, Vol. VIII, p.375.

<sup>81</sup>CWSV, Vol. VIII, p.352.

<sup>82</sup> As the Sadharani noted in a report dated 4 January 1885: 'the native who comes from England comes to lose a very important quality, namely, the power of ascertaining what constitutes honour and what constitutes dishonour; otherwise they could have never come to believe that the wearing of English dress makes them respected.' Reported in RNP, No.2 of 1885, p. 56.

physical appearance. In a letter to Swami Brahmananda in 1895, he alluded to the need for wearing a dress that was suitable for preserving one's cultural identity: 'It sets my nerves on edge to look at those who don hats and pose as Sahibs! Black as chimney sweeps, and calling themselves Europeans! Why not wear one's country-dress, as befits gentlemen?'<sup>83</sup> Vivekananda's reconstruction of the sannyasi icon in its rendering of the ascetic distinctively and visibly 'Indian' fed into contemporary questions about 'national' dress and appealed to the early nationalists as a marker of a distinguishing culture.<sup>84</sup>

Vivekananda's oppositional image of masculinity also incorporated some of the virtues of Western manliness. In a letter to Haripada Mitra written in January 1894, he talked about the need for emulating some of the virtues of Western manliness: 'Can you become an occidental of occidentals in your spirit of equality, freedom, work, and energy, and at the same time a Hindu to the very backbone in religious culture and instincts?'<sup>85</sup> The redefined masculinity of the sannyasi had to balance the 'Western' notion of hard work with the indigenous notion of spiritual energy. For only when this balance was achieved could the redefined sannyasi carry out his social responsibilities, for Vivekananda's depiction of his life as a sannyasi was an active public one as opposed to the traditional image of the world-renouncing sannyasi who retired from the arena of all things material. The rendering of a space previously accessible only

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<sup>83</sup>CWSV, Vol. VI, p.337.

<sup>84</sup>Cf. Emma Tarlo, 'The Problem of what to Wear: The Politics of Khadi in Late Colonial India', South Asia Research, 11:2, pp. 134-57.

<sup>85</sup>CWSV, translated text, p.29.

to initiate into something that would admit the general public was an attempt to redefine the role of the sannyasi as well as what constituted 'public'. Vivekananda himself exemplified this twin process - a sannyasi whose social roots lay in the educated urban middle class of Calcutta and one who bore a deep social commitment.

He articulated his faith in this redefined sannyasi as the hero capable of redeeming the 'condition of India' through social work:

Suppose some disinterested Sannyasins, bent on doing good to others, go from village to village, disseminating education and seeking in various ways to better the condition of all down to the Chandala, through oral teaching, and by means of maps, cameras, globes, and accessories - can't that bring forth good in time?<sup>86</sup>

This innovative public role formulated for a sadhu was later explained by his brother, Bhupendranath Datta, the Swadeshi activist, as a historically necessary departure from orthodox notions:

He organized Sadhus recruited from the middle class for social service scheme that he put forth ... Formerly, the Christian missionaries did this work ... Lastly came Swami Vivekananda to mobilize young monks for social service. This new phase of Sadhu movement is in contra-distinction with the quietism and pietism of time-hallowed custom of recluse life. The Sadhu of the Ramakrishna order lives out of the society as well as in it.<sup>87</sup>

The public role envisaged for the sannyasis who were basically drawn from Calcutta's bhadralok families (except Lutu Maharaj)<sup>88</sup>, infused this different notion of masculinity with another layer of meaning. It was this group in Calcutta that had been affronted with colonial notions of weakness and deeply felt the pain of exclusion

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<sup>86</sup>CWSV, Vol. VI, p.254-5.

<sup>87</sup>Bhupendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda, p. 323.

<sup>88</sup>See Swami Gambhirananda (ed.), The Apostles of Shri Ramakrishna, Calcutta, 1982 and Christopher Isherwood, Ramakrishna and his Disciples, Calcutta, 1990.



from higher administrative posts. As his revolutionary brother, Bhupendranath deciphered it, it was for this humiliated social group that Vivekananda's alternative masculinity had the greatest appeal. The nationalist imagination of Swadeshi activists, as we shall see in Chapter V, was inspired by his fiery Lectures from Colombo to Almora.<sup>89</sup>

If the west represented a crude and spiritually empty physicality he depicted Indian spirituality as an expression of disciplined physicality. But if Hindus were to become technicians of the soul, they could not do it through spirituality alone, certain harmful habits had to be sloughed off :

speaking and not doing has become a habit with us. What is the cause of that? Physical weakness. This sort of weak brain is not able to do anything ... You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger ... You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the Atman when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourselves as men.<sup>90</sup>

Related to such formulations was the tremendous prominence given to the karma-yoga principle of the Bhagavad Gita in nineteenth-century India. The reasons for the pre-eminent position occupied by the Gita during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have been variously attributed to the growth of nationalism<sup>91</sup> and to the

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<sup>89</sup>Bhupendranath Datta wrote: in 'every gymnasium ... of the Revolutionary Party of Bengal, his work entitled 'From Colombo to Almora' was read. From 1902 to 1930 there was no better seller in the market than Swamiji's books.' Swami Vivekananda: Patriot-Prophet, p. 213.

<sup>90</sup> CWSV, Vol III, p.242.

<sup>91</sup>See Ajit Ray, 'Bankim Chandra Chatterji's New Hinduism and the Bhagavad Gita' in Robert N. Minor (ed.), Modern Indian Interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita, Albany, 1986, pp. 34-43.

conscious attempt to counteract Christian missionary literature.<sup>92</sup> The importance of appeal of karma-yoga, as V. Subramaniam has pointed out, can be read in terms of the attractions it held for the middle class participants in the Indian nationalist movement. Differentiating between the privileging of the Vedas and Upanishads as texts in the early British period and the later importance of the Gita, Subramaniam explains this shift in emphasis, in terms of a competitive spirit that had to necessarily be resigned to the absence of immediate results:

during the first and second decades of this century the Hindu middle class competed with its British counterpart in all branches of activity to show it could do well or better. This meant emulating the Protestant virtue of hard work without expecting immediate reward.<sup>93</sup>

The complexities that shaped this notion of activism also consolidated it with the integral notion of asceticism. The lecture Karma-Yoga was probably first delivered in America in 1896 and translated by Swami Shuddhananda for Udbodhan later. The equation of the notion of non-resistance to the 'highest manifestation of power' was framed in terms of the three stages of Hindu life - the student, the householder and the sannyasi. While insisting that 'No one of these stages is intrinsically superior to another', Vivekananda ranked the renouncing sannyasi as the only figure equipped to fulfil the work ahead in India. Even if karma-yoga was to have its message for both the world-renouncing sannyasi and the worldly householder, it was the character of the sannyasi who could retain autonomy and in the process empower himself.

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<sup>92</sup>See Eric J. Sharpe, The Universal Gita: Western Images of the Bhagavad Gita: A Bicentenary Survey, London, 1985.

<sup>93</sup>V. Subramaniam, 'Karmayoga and the Rise of the Indian Middle Class' in Journal of Arts and Ideas, Nos. 14-15, July-December 1987, p. 138.

The nineteenth-century formulation of the principle of karma identified it with an active and responsible redrafting of a cultural identity which Vivekananda brought into a sharp focus. Interestingly combining biological causality with teleology, he said:

Your own Karma has manufactured this body, and nobody did it for you ... You yourself eat; nobody eats for you. You make blood, and muscles, and body out of the food; nobody does it for you ... One link in the chain explains the infinite chain ... all the responsibility of good and evil is on you.<sup>94</sup>

While the principle of karma as depicted by Vivekananda laid an unprecedented stress on responsibility, the unique function of what he called the 'Hindu' race had also been determined by its karma - which also characterised it:

Each race ... has a peculiar bent ... each race has a peculiar mission to fulfil in the life of the world ... Political greatness or military power is never the mission of our race; it never was, and mark my words, it never will be. But there has been another mission given to us, which is, to conserve, to preserve, to accumulate ... into a dynamo, all the spiritual energy of the race, and that concentrated energy is to pour forth in a deluge on the world whenever circumstances are propitious. Let the Persian or the Greek, the Roman, the Arab, or the Englishman march his battalions, conquer the world, and link the different nations together, and the philosophy of India is ever ready to flow along the new-made channels into the veins of the nations of the world.<sup>95</sup>

The colonial construction of the 'weak' Hindu in Bengal was thus made to undergo a significant shift as Vivekananda designated his functionality in terms of his capacity for individual karma. The concept of karma in the context of racial discussion also brought in a comparative perspective with each race allocated a distinctive function.

After his death in 1902, these concepts of karma, masculinity and service for

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<sup>94</sup>CWSV, Vol III, p.161.

<sup>95</sup>Vivekananda's first public lecture after his return, delivered at Colombo on 15 January 1897. CWSV, Vol III, pp. 108-9.

the country were given a militant edge by his English disciple Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble).<sup>96</sup> Together with his drafting of an alternative masculinity, Vivekananda had also stressed the alternative nature of the energy India could generate. During the Swadeshi movement this particular idea was taken further by Aurobindo, Barindra Kumar Ghosh and others. In 1918, the Sedition Committee, with Justice Rowlatt as President, saw Vivekananda's mission as well as the exhortations of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita as influencing and inspiring the beginnings of the revolutionary movement in Bengal.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

It is only by locating Vivekananda's formulations within a broader construction of an oppositional cultural identity articulated within colonial parameters that we can begin to understand the multiple links between asceticism and nationalism. By not looking at these significant links, scholars like Leonard Gordon can only trace the outlines of an incomplete story and conclude that 'the route from the selfless autonomous, energy generating sannyasin to the resourceful political worker was not a long one.'<sup>98</sup>

The route however, as we have tried to show, can hardly be described as short

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<sup>96</sup>Vivekananda ordained Nivedita as a naishtiki brahmacharini in 1899. In 1901, the Amrita Bazar Patrika distinguished between the acceptance of Hindu philosophy and conversion to Hinduism in order to refute Nivedita's claims to be a Hindu. See Shankari Prasad Basu and Sunilbihari Ghosh, Vivekananda in Indian Newspapers, p. 323.

<sup>97</sup>Sedition Committee 1918: Report, Calcutta, 1918, p. 17.

<sup>98</sup>Leonard Gordon, Bengal: The Nationalist Movement, p. 79.

or straightforward. The 'new' alternative masculinity was implicated in the formulations of a nationalist identity. The roots of this alternative masculinity as the heroic ascetic can be read as an expression of resistance - a crucial part of the nineteenth-century proclamation of a different cultural identity.

This alternative masculinity entrusted the male with power to save his motherland by channeling the energy that was capable of procreation to the service of the country. This anticipates Gandhi's explicit sexual experiments to 'acquire the kind of moral and spiritual power he thought he needed to arrest the tidal wave of violence raging all around him'.<sup>99</sup> In the discourse of early nationalism in Bengal, it was Vivekananda who formed the link between the growing preoccupation with asceticism and sannyas in the nineteenth century and the Swadeshi sannyasi. By locating him within the parameters of this emerging Hindu discourse, it becomes possible to see the progressive fleshing out of the sannyasi icon and its significance for early nationalism. There is in fact, further scope for mapping out this complex process which was an important marker within the context of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal. Establishing its significance, makes it possible to see the transformation of the traditional figure of the self-reliant, selfless sannyasi capable of cultivating spiritual energy into the devoted nationalist son of Mother India.

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<sup>99</sup>Bhikhu Parekh, Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse, New Delhi, 1989, p. 201.

## CHAPTER V

### CULTURAL IDENTITY AND POLITICAL CRISIS:

#### BENGAL 1900 - 1905.

Addressing a gathering of the Bhowanipur, Kalighat and Ballygunge and Baghbazar Boy's Association, to celebrate the first Pratapaditya Festival in 1903, Sarala Debi attempted to place the humiliated race of Bengalis on the same plane as the heroic martial races:

We the children of Bengal are being systematically deprived of our national heritage. The lesson which we learn from histories concocted by foreigners ... is that the Marathi, the Punjabi and the Rajput are indeed the brave races of India, ... [and] the Bengalee cannot boast of having inherited any heroic traditions whatsoever ... How proud are the Marathas of Shivaji...Just as they came to the front and proved their heroism at the time when Shivaji flourished, so did we during the reign of Pratap. Let the Bengalee boy remember this, and hold his head as high up as his Marathi brother.<sup>1</sup>

Sarala Debi's speech, as we shall see, was an attempt to reinstate the heroic in contemporary Bengal, and shared a continuity with the historical writings which were shaping a specific martial Hindu identity in the Bengal of her times. In her efforts to excavate heroes from the past, however, she gave a innovative twist to the existing Hindu discourse on past glory. Her heroes were specifically chosen from Bengal, and their heroism was identified in terms of their resistance to Mughal power - thus simultaneously giving the Hindu heroic identity a regional dimension as well as a more emphatically Hindu distinctiveness. The nationalist ceremonies that she

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<sup>1</sup>Sarala Debi Ghosal, 'The Heritage of the Bengalee', translated and reprinted in The Bengalee, 5 June 1903, p. 3.

designed between 1902 and 1905, in fact, precipitated a heroic Hindu identity that became very important during the Swadeshi movement which followed the Partition of Bengal.

Very little attention has so far been focused on this important dimension of identity-formation in the context of nationalism in Bengal. The earlier tendency focused on the ideals and sentiments that shaped the Swadeshi movement in Bengal isolated from the events that took place in that historical period.<sup>2</sup> Another general trend that guided the historical approach to the turbulent years of the Swadeshi movement was the preoccupation with the Bengal 'Renaissance' which located in the Swadeshi movement the political manifestation of a 'Renaissance' sensibility which has since been problematised largely in terms of the limitations imposed by a colonial context.<sup>3</sup> A parallel trend which continued up to the 1970s was a tendency to see early nationalism as a fulfilment of the proto-nationalist statements of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda and other cultural leaders.<sup>4</sup> Since the concern of most of these scholars was the formation of a political identity, the cultural manifestations of this identity so crucial to the earliest political movement have been largely ignored. The cultural events constructed by the evolving Hindu discourse, as

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<sup>2</sup>See for example, Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, India's Fight for Freedom or the Swadeshi Movement (1905-1906), Calcutta, 1958.

<sup>3</sup>See especially, Atul Chandra Gupta (ed.), Studies in the Bengal Renaissance, Calcutta, 1958. The most representative collection of essays that points out the limits imposed by colonialism on the Bengal 'Renaissance' is V.C.Joshi (ed.), Ram Mohan and the Process of Modernization in India, New Delhi, 1975.

<sup>4</sup>Especially significant is Bimanbehari Majumdar, Militant Nationalism in India and its Socio-religious Background, Calcutta, 1966.

we shall see, generally directed the mood of Swadeshi politics.

Sumit Sarkar's comprehensive study of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal published in 1973, however, showed an awareness of the cultural dimensions of the problem even as it located certain significant shifts within nationalist politics from bhadralok outrage at the withdrawal of certain privileges to the awareness that the countryside and the cities had to unite at this confrontational moment.<sup>5</sup> Within this broad ideological framework, Sarkar located labour agitations and trade unions, Swadeshi Associations and Samitis and the Secret Societies which were part of the movement. Sarkar's exhaustive study analyses the divisions within the movement while appropriately stressing the economic aspects of the Swadeshi movement. However, he leaves very little scope for any discussion of the important ways in which the movement harmonised with an already existing Hindu discourse and so aided in organising a Hindu identity.<sup>6</sup>

The ways in which colonial denigration led to an alternative formulation of identity in the context of Bengal has been pointed out by Leonard Gordon's 1974 study.<sup>7</sup> While making some significant observations about this pivotal aspect of identity-formation, Gordon left this particular dimension largely unexamined. As we have demonstrated in the earlier chapters, the creation of an oppositional identity was shaped and expressed through a range of cultural practices - organisational and

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<sup>5</sup>Sumit Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908, New Delhi, 1973.

<sup>6</sup>Sarkar comments on these aspects without exploring them in details in the Chapter 'Trends in Bengal's Swadeshi Movement', Ibid., pp. 31-91.

<sup>7</sup>See Leonard A. Gordon, Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940, New York, 1974, pp. 2-11.



discursive. The moment of political confrontation represented by the Swadeshi movement marked an important moment of transition for this discourse. This significantly transformed some of the ambiguities that had characterised earlier expressions of a Hindu/Bengali/Indian identity by resolving it in favour of a public, assertive Hindu identity. In other words, the moment of crisis when it came in 1905 had at its disposal a fully worked out oppositional discourse which could be deployed and given a political form.

In this chapter, we shall concentrate on the ways in which the network of ideas constructed by the nineteenth-century Hindu discourse found new forms of expression at this critical moment. Although the Swadeshi movement with its stress on self-reliance and boycott of foreign goods represents a major break with the earlier period, we shall see the way in which the maturing Hindu discourse about identity was invoked in this intense and politically-charged period. Therefore, on the one hand the Swadeshi period marked a coming together of the cultural and the political, and on the other hand, it signalled major changes ushered in by this intense and critical period.

As we have seen, in Chapters I and II, a notable preoccupation with physical culture clearly configured the cultural identity formulated by the Hindu discourse. The alleged lack of strength of the non-martial Bengali had activated an alternative and oppositional heroic typology from Rajput and Maratha legend. However by 1900 this self-descriptive discourse also found its own curious paradigm of martial virtue in the person of a Bengali - Colonel Suresh Biswas.

## Heroism and the Present: Colonel Suresh Biswas

The very image a Bengali colonel defied the colonial stereotype of the effete Bengali. Little wonder then that the story of Colonel Suresh Biswas should have been immensely popular during the Swadeshi period.<sup>8</sup> Suresh Biswas, moreover looked every inch a frail Bengali yet his achievements in distant Brazil were seen as an important part of the oppositional self-image. The biography of the Colonel, first published in 1900, took great care to emphasise his rootedness in Bengal's cultural traditions and at the same time attempted to redeem the colonial construction of the 'weak' rice-eating Bengali.

Born in 1861 in the village of Nathpur, in Nadia in Bengal, Suresh Biswas had travelled to England in 1874, later he worked as an animal trainer in Hamburg and had finally joined the Brazilian army in 1887. The biography of Suresh Biswas was published together with seven of the letters he wrote to his uncle from Brazil between 1887 and 1894.

In a long Preface, the author Upendra Krishna Banerji, meticulously located Suresh Biswas's roots in Bengal - noting ironically that it was this flourishing landscape of plenty that had allured even the brave Aryans into indolent placidity.<sup>9</sup> The Preface is particularly interesting in the way it reveals the story of a colonial slight. The author defers his introduction of the hero in order to discuss the colonial

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<sup>8</sup>S.P. Sen (ed.), The Dictionary of National Biography, Vol I, Calcutta, 1972, pp. 198-9.

<sup>9</sup>Upendra Krishna Banerji, Karnel Suresh Bishvas, 1900, Second ed., Calcutta, 1909-10, p. 4.

attitude to the Bengalis.

Condensing Macaulay's description of the Bengali in 1830 as 'feeble even to effeminacy' and one for whom, 'courage, independence, veracity are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally infavourable',<sup>10</sup> the author denies them any historical legitimacy. However, he points out that colonial views of 'weakness and timidity have been based on Macaulay's wispy fiction'.<sup>11</sup> Notorious amongst others who had consolidated such colonial misrepresentations, according to the author, was G.W. Steevens, the journalist who had arrived in India on the track of the newly appointed Viceroy, Lord Curzon, in 1898-9. Steeven's description had reiterated Macaulay's basic depiction combining the physical with the moral:

by his legs you shall know the Bengali. The leg of a free man is straight or a little bandy, so that he can stand on it solidly ... The Bengali's leg is either skin and bones; the same size all the way down, with knocking knobs for knees, or else it is very fat and globular, also turning in at the knees, with round thighs like a woman's. The Bengali's leg is the leg of a slave.<sup>12</sup>

Having classified the physical attributes of a slave community, Steevens had also categorised his mental and moral qualities:

He has the virtues of the slave and his vices, - strong family affections, industry, frugality, a trick of sticking to what he wants until he wears you down, a quick imitative intelligence and amazing verbal cleverness; dishonesty, suspiciousness, lack of initiative, cowardice, ingratitude, utter incapacity for any sort of chivalry.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Thomas Macaulay, 'Critical, Historical and Miscellaneous Essays', The Works of Lord Macaulay, Vol V, Boston, 1860, pp. 19-20 quoted in Leonard Gordon, Bengal: The Nationalist Movement, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>Upendra Krishna Banerji, Karnel Suresh Bishvas, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup>G.W. Steevens, In India, London, 1899, pp. 85-6.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

The discussion of the views of Steevens and Macaulay had a distinctive resonance for the framing of an oppositional identity through the persona of Suresh Biswas. The assumptions that lay behind the writing of this heroic biography affirmed and legitimised a self-image that was capable of defying the contemptuous colonial one.

This purpose expressed itself in the closing lines of the Preface:

The great man whose life we have set out to describe today, in the context of which we have entered into such meaningless things, - he exemplifies how capable Bengalis are of heroism even today and how gifted genius can express itself even in adversity.<sup>14</sup>

The alternative heroic agenda, however, was constructed within overlapping political and cultural concerns. In the opening chapter the author concerns himself with a problem which The National Paper had articulated thirty-three years earlier - the problem of defining what constituted civilisation. In this particular assessment, wealth and economy were rejected as inadequate standards while technology and industry were identified as techniques that aided the domination of the East by the West. In a significant overlap, science was viewed as manifesting itself differently in Bengal:

The science of Bengal is the science of ethical family-life - Bengal's science is the science of happiness and peace. The aim of Bengal's science is the enrichment and growth of family and society, of human qualities and of peace.<sup>15</sup>

Read with Steeven's allegations of excessive family affection that characterised a slave, Upendra Krishna's assertion placed the contested qualities of Bengalis on a

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<sup>14</sup>Upendra Krishna Banerji, Karnel Suresh Bishvas, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 18.

different scale of values altogether. The courageous Colonel was therefore a true son of Bengal - a terrain where the cultivation of both spiritual and physical qualities were equally emphasised.

While grit and determination were seen as the defining qualities in the early life of Suresh Biswas, his conversion to Christianity was glossed over by the author. Accounting for the conversion in terms of a trend that characterised the 1860s and 70s, the narrator stated that the tide had presently turned in favour of the ancient Arya-dharma of India. As we have pointed out earlier, the Hindu identity promulgated by this discourse not only defined itself in cultural rather than religious terms, Vivekananda's emphasis on the universality of Hinduism had stressed the way in which it included the essence of all religions. Therefore, Suresh despite his conversion was identified in the text as a Bengali from Nabadvip - the major centre of the Medieval scholarly tradition in Bengal.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, Suresh, the narrator assured the reader, looked every inch the weak Bengali - 'If one saw Suresh one could not make him out to be a strong man. His frame was frail and his body far from being muscular. But perhaps his muscles were made of iron'.<sup>17</sup> The paradoxical existence of strength in a weak body was illustrated with an anecdote from his experiences in England. While working in a circus in Kent, Suresh had effortlessly defeated an English wrestler in open combat. Later in 1893,

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<sup>16</sup>Another example of a similar inclusion despite his conversion to Christianity was Upadhyay Brahmabandhab, the editor of Sandhya who described himself as a sannyasi as evidenced in his Bilat Jatri Sannyasir Chithi ('Letters of a Sannyasi from England'), Calcutta, 1906.

<sup>17</sup>Upendra Krishna Banerji, Karnel Suresh Bishvas, p. 144.

as a Lieutenant in the Brazilian army, he had successfully defended the city of Rio with a meagre squadron of fifty soldiers. We learn from his letters to his uncle, written from Brazil, that his deeds and his photograph in a Lieutenant's uniform were publicised among family and friends. What made this story particularly attractive to Swadeshi nationalists, who drew inspiration from him was his physical capability despite his slight frame. In Bengal the interest in Suresh Biswas endured even after his death in Rio de Janeiro in 1902. By 1940 his biography was to become an archetypal portrayal of Bengali courage as illustrated by his inclusion in Upendra Nath Bhattacharya's Rapid Reader for Schools - Banger Bir Santan or 'The Brave Sons of Bengal.'<sup>18</sup>

If the image of the Bengali Colonel in Brazil filled a major gap in Bengali self-portraiture, in the Calcutta of 1902, parallel efforts to fashion a heroic identity were detectable. The ubiquitous nature of this discourse thus expressed itself in a wide range of cultural practices. We have seen in Chapter I the way in which the Hindu Mela had enabled the crystallisation of a pervasive Hindu identity. Cultural events which projected a defiant self-image, as we shall see, began to seriously incorporate political dimensions in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>18</sup>The book has brief biographies of Bengalis who exemplified resistance and prowess, Vijayasinha who conquered Ceylon as also Pratapaditya and Sitaram Ray. In the last story about Colonel Suresh Biswas, the Colonel is seen to motivate the Brazilian soldiers by setting himself up as a brave son of Bengal! The book ran into 16 editions in five years. Upendra Nath Bhattacharya, Banger Bira Santana, 1940, Calcutta, 16th edition 1945.

## Heroism, the Historical Sense and Early Nationalist Rituals

Between 1900-1908, the reinterpretation of rituals and festivals of Hindu life, became a nationalist obsession. The earlier period had seen this preoccupation in the writings of Akshay Kumar Sarkar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and others. As we have demonstrated in Chapter III, Bankim's depiction of the Motherland was constructed from an available iconography of various mother-goddesses, among whom the goddess Durga occupied a prominent place. In 1905 as a direct outcome of the Partition of Bengal the familiar image of the goddess worshipped annually underwent a symbolic transformation.<sup>19</sup> But the transformation of this annual festival coincided with the institutionalisation of a number of other commemorative ceremonies<sup>20</sup> which gained an unprecedented significance prior to the Partition. The moment of political confrontation therefore found a ready vehicle of self-assertion in a contemporary 'invention of tradition' - the reinterpretation of cultural events.

We have seen in Chapter I the ways in which the annual Hindu Mela sought to validate Hindu custom and recommend the recollection of past glory. The parallel emphasis on an excavation of the glorious past, which we have examined in Chapter

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<sup>19</sup>Thus Bipin Chandra Pal wrote: 'Durga stands to-day, to immense numbers of the Bengali people, not merely as a Pauranic Deity, or as a mythological figure, but as a visible representation of the Eternal Spirit of the Indian Race.' Bipin Chandra Pal, 'The Durga Pujas: III (1905),' *Swadeshi and Swaraj: The Rise of New Patriotism*, Calcutta, 1954, p. 111.

<sup>20</sup>I use the term in the sense Paul Conerton uses it in a different context, in his book, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge, 1989 as the means by which 'the narrative tells of historical events ... transfigured by mythicisation into unchanging and unchangeable substances...The fundamental constants are struggle, sacrifice, victory.' pp. 42-3.

II, substantiated an image of a heroic Hindu mainly in terms of Rajput and Maratha achievements. In an attempt to fuse these two strands into a coherent Hindu/Bengali identity, Sarala Debi Ghoshal, daughter of the novelist Swarna Kumari Debi and niece of Rabindranath Tagore, formulated the Pratapaditya Utsab and the Birashtami Brata in 1902. She claimed, however, that the stimulus for both these festivals came from contemporary Bengali sources.

In 1896, Satya Charan Shastri wrote Banger Shesh Hindu Svadhin Maharaj : Pratapaditya Jiban Charit, a book that became extremely important for the ceremonies that venerated glorious Hindu Bengalis of the past during the years 1902-3. This fleshing out of a Bengali zamindar's resistance to Mughal authority as a paradigm of 'the last independent Hindu king of Bengal' endowed the figure with an added resonance as an icon of resistance. According to Sarala Debi, it was an attempt to place Bengalis on a plane of equality with the celebrated valour of the Marathas, Sikhs and Rajputs. In her speech at the Pratapaditya festival, from which we have already quoted, she repeatedly stressed the unfavourable position occupied by the Bengali:

These Marathas have left a stamp on the history of India....But we have gathered no food for pride from the past ... I turned my gaze only to the future under the impression that I had no right to look to the past ... Then all of a sudden, I came to know one day that we have been long duped and deprived of our birth-right by enemies... The news of that noble heritage was brought to us - by rare good fortune - not by any generous Englishman or Scotsman - but by a true son of the soil - Satya Charan Shastri.<sup>21</sup>

Satya Charan Sastri's book repeatedly stressed that Pratapaditya was in fact, one amongst many independent kings who had defended Bengal against Muslim.

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<sup>21</sup>Sarala Debi Ghosal, 'The Heritage of the Bengalees' The Bengalee, 5 June, 1903, p. 3.



According to Shastri, Pratapaditya on his visit to Delhi, had but one thought:

How can this fallen race [of Bengalis] enrich themselves. A few heroes have arrived from Central Asia, conquered India through sheer physical strength and become prosperous with India's abundant wealth. How can he work so that the glory of the Hindus and their authority may be reestablished. Consolidated action would perhaps rebuild the Hindu kingdom. These thoughts became deeply implanted in his mind.<sup>22</sup>

What this festival attempted to create was Bengal's own heroes, who in the past defended their territory with a fierce patriotism equivalent to Maratha or Rajput valour. Simultaneously, Sarala Debi attempted to place historical and mythical heroes synchronically - focusing not on their individual differences in heroic achievements but on the theme of valour.

The songs and the prayers that were composed for these ceremonies reiterated the same theme. In her autobiography, Sarala Debi records the Sanskrit stotra or a ceremonial chant composed for the Pratapaditya festival - commemorating the coronation of 'Bengal's last independent Hindu King'. The stotra paid homage to the heroes of Bengal and related them not only to the brave sons of India from other regions, i.e., Pratapaditya and Sitaram Ray to Ranjit Singh, Shivaji, Rana Pratap, but also to the legendary Meghnad, Bhisma, Drona, Karna, Arjuna, Bhima and finally Rama.<sup>23</sup> Another song glorifying Udayaditya, the son of Pratapaditya, composed for a similar festival in September 1903, urged Bengalis to recall their glorious past and charge themselves with devotion, courage and heroism.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Bharati,

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<sup>22</sup>Satya Charan Shastri Banger Shesh Hindu Svadhin Maharaj : Pratapaditya Jiban-Carit, Calcutta, 1896, p. 44.

<sup>23</sup>Sarala Debi Chaudhurani Jibaner Jhara Pata, Calcutta, 1957, pp.141-2.

<sup>24</sup>Bijay Candra Majumdar, 'Udayaditya', Bharati, October-November, 1903, p.783.

the journal Sarala Debi edited, carried an article on Senapati Kali, the general of Pratapaditya's army.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from the Pratapaditya festival, Sarala Debi, had also fashioned the Birashtami Utsab, or the festival to celebrate the heroes of the past. Sarala Debi's specific attempts at 'inventing' a nationalist ceremony based itself on the contemporary rediscovery of the past that was being attempted by several authors. Within this historical ferment, the first Birashtami Utsab was celebrated at the residence of her father Janaki Nath Ghoshal on 10 October 1902. Sarala Debi tells us in her autobiography, Jibaner Jhara Pata, that her idea to celebrate this festival on the eighth day of the Durga Puja celebrations was nothing new, she had discovered that it had existed in the past:

[My work was] to recover what had existed in the culture of Bengal for a long time, and what had got discontinued. To bring the Bengali mothers back to the path of mothering the brave, and so to revive the practice of this brata or ritual.<sup>26</sup>

Religious festivals thus 'recovered' were perceived to be signs of a vigorous 'national' life which existed in the past. The refashioning of rituals attempted to answer a pressing cultural need.

Yet, what were these 'discoveries' of heroic Bengalis and such festivals attempting to do? As the Bharati article on Senapati Kali pronounced:

A country that has had brave men and had known how to venerate them- will one day learn to remember that veneration. A race that has a past - must also

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<sup>25</sup>'Senapati Kali' Bharati, January-February, 1904, pp. 844-51.

<sup>26</sup>Sarala Debi, Jibaner Jhara Pata, pp.140-1.

have a future - this is a hope we cannot abandon.<sup>27</sup>

All these commemorative ceremonies were attempting in this way to establish a continuity with the past. That this past itself, had become a contested field - with numerous voices clamouring for authenticity has been elaborated in Chapter II - where the project of history itself was perceived to be an empowering self-defining project. Such rituals valorised heroic historiography and integrated the heroics into the self-constructed cultural identity of the contemporary Hindu discourse.

Physical culture as we have emphasised in Chapter I remained an integral part of the masculinity to be reinstated. The Birashtami celebrations held at Sarala Debi's residence in Ballygunge, Calcutta, comprised gymnastics as well as fencing. The Begum of Murshidabad distributed awards at the first celebration. The awards consisted of boxing gloves, daggers, lathis, or staves and medals inscribed with the words: 'Be Dauntless Heroes' and 'God Destroys Weakness'.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed Sarala Debi's appeal to 'Young Bengal' published in the correspondence columns of The Bengalee in 1903, talked about the sword as the symbol of 'new national self-consciousness': 'What better symbol than the sword, the steel of honour, the soul of the Kshatriya can represent him of whose lineaments we have no picture or description.'<sup>29</sup> This appeal, despite the descriptive resonance it generated was also questioned by certain representatives of 'Young Bengal' in the

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<sup>27</sup>'Senapati Kali', Bharati, p. 851.

<sup>28</sup>Sarala Debi, Jibaner Jhara Pata, p. 141.

<sup>29</sup> 'An Open Letter to Young Bengal' by Sarala Debi Ghosal in The Bengalee 29 August, Saturday, 1903, p. 3.

columns of The Bengalee. A letter signed 'Young Bengal', which appeared on 8 September 1903, disparagingly referred to this plan as constituting the senseless past-time of the upper classes,<sup>30</sup> while another response signed 'A Young Islam' situated these celebrations within the realm of the activities of the 'respectable class'.<sup>31</sup> The very pseudonyms chosen by the respondents indicate the split between the Hindu and Muslim section of Calcutta's population

Thus the dichotomy set up between 'Young Bengal' and 'Young Islam' made it impossible for two integral parts of Bengal to unite on a common ground. To be a Bengali meant, within the context of the Birastami, to have a past where heroism was defined in opposition to the Muslim oppressors, thus effectually excluding 'Young Islam'. Here, indeed lay the basic paradox. Sarala Debi had declared in the pages of Bharati the same year, that Indian history had now evolved to its last phase where 'Hindu-Muslim unity' was called for to resolve the prevailing opposition between the 'Eastern' and the 'Western'.<sup>32</sup> However, such opinions were rendered ineffectual by the dislocations within the discourse which sought to ritualise heroic history in Hindu terms.

Moreover, the hegemonic undercurrent of such redesigned ceremonies demonstrated another aspect of its limitation. The fencing master employed by Sarala Debi was one Professor Murtaza - described in an official report as 'a travelling

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<sup>30</sup>The Bengali, 8 September, 1903, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup>The Bengalee, 13 September, 1903, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup>Sarala Debi Chaudhurani 'Bharater Hindu O Musalman' in Bharati August-September, 1903, p. 436.

acrobat and a professional strong man.'<sup>33</sup> This Muslim instructor is no 'outsider' for the same report points out that 'he is a protege of Babu Surendra Nath Banerjee' and is 'held in respect by Bengali boys of a class that will possibly furnish the germ of a physical force party'.<sup>34</sup> Very little by way of detail is available in Sarala Debi's autobiography about the Professor or her boys. The report of the first Birashtami Utsab in The Bengalee indicates that Professor Murtaza had comprehended Sarala Debi's lessons of heroism quite competently.<sup>35</sup> The instructors who would make a hero of the Bengali: Muslim or a member of the subordinate class, was necessarily left out of this hegemonising discourse on Bengali heroism. As John Rosselli has pointed out:

although the redemption of educated Bengalis from the slur of effeteness meant the calling in as instructors of helpers and servers - lathiyals, door-keepers, low-caste men and Muslims - these men were not acknowledged as full members of Bengali society that was being redeemed. In the myth of physical downfall and resurgence the educated elite appeared as sole actors.<sup>36</sup>

In her inspiring letters to Aswini Coomar Banerjee, Sarala Debi had asked him

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<sup>33</sup> Confidential Demiofficial from H.H. Risley to Sir Arthur Godley, Under Secretary of State (India), in Home Public Proceedings, A, June 1906, No.30,p. 9-57. NAI.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 9-57.

<sup>35</sup>Murtaza was reported to have defended physical culture on the grounds that it demonstrated self-reliance: 'he asked amidst loud applause, who was more loyal - the Maharajah of Indar [sic!], Sir Pertap Singh, skilled in the 'science of arms', and prepared to fight and lay down his life for the King, or the milk-sop hopelessly helpless without his burkundaz?' The Bengalee, 15 October 1902, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>John Rosselli, 'The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal', Past and Present, No. 86, 1980, p. 148.

to 'hire a Palowan - or wrestler - to teach himself and the boys at home'.<sup>37</sup> What then constituted the appeal of these empowering rituals to the educated middle class when its main participants were less eminent figures?<sup>38</sup> In this refashioning of a heroic identity the educated middle class saw itself as organisers - as those involved in the reestablishment of fearlessness and chivalry amongst all groups. The Bengalee dubbed Sarala Debi 'the discoverer of heroes'<sup>39</sup>, and despite the more conservative response from other sections of the Bengali Press,<sup>40</sup> the Jyoti, of Chittagong, saw the Birashtami festival, as a harbinger of welcome change.<sup>41</sup> The reformulation of a heroic masculinity (ironically by a woman), brought into this discourse an obvious contradiction. But the fact that Sarala Debi, was perceived by nationalist leaders as having somehow transcended her sexuality resolved this incongruity.<sup>42</sup>

If Sarala Debi's refashioned ceremonies attempted to vindicate the non-martial and unheroic Bengali, the advent of the Shivaji festival attempted to place Bengalis

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<sup>37</sup>Sarala Debi's letter to Aswini Coomar Banerjee, dated 20.10.02. She mentions something similar in another letter dated 23.10.02. Private Papers of Aswini Coomar Banerjee at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

<sup>38</sup>Sumit Sarkar mentions the Swadeshi activist Pulin Behari Das, leader of the Dacca Anushilan Samiti as one of the young men trained by Professor Murtaza. It is difficult to trace who the other young men were. Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, p. 400.

<sup>39</sup>'Editorial', The Bengalee, 30 Aug 1903, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup>The Ranggalay, 6 September 1903, quoted in Report of the Native Newspapers: Bengal, (RNP), No.37 of 1903, criticised her on grounds that such actions ill-suited an Indian woman, p. 833.

<sup>41</sup>Jyoti, 15 October 1903, in RNP, No. 43 of 1903, p. 925.

<sup>42</sup>In Chapter IV, we have seen how her marriage was perceived to be a loss to nationalism. See Sarala Debi, Jibaner Jhara Pata, p. 186.

on a pan-Indian/Hindu stage. This redesigned ritual indicated an important shift in the oppositional Hindu identity which was being presented by the Hindu discourse. From the Hindu Mela to Sarala Debi, cultural events were seen to be significant vehicles for the Hindu discourse. This was related to the notion of visibility that such a public display guaranteed. The genesis of the Shivaji Festival in Calcutta and its appeal was related to the nineteenth-century project of history-writing which glorified the Marathas as we have seen in Chapter II. However, the appropriation of a festival directly from Maharashtra (unlike historical writings about the Rajputs which was indebted to Tod and his translators), implied the effort to construct Hindu heroism on a pan-Indian scale in public and political terms.

Ranade's The Rise of Maratha Power, published in 1900, drew significant parallels with contemporary India. The lessons of this historiography were overtly political. Ranade's history was characterised by unstated parallels between the past and the present:

The feeling of patriotism illustrates most forcibly the characteristic result of the formation of a Nation in the best sense of the word, and constitutes another reason why the History of the Marathas deserve special study. It is the history of a true Indian Nationality raising its head high above the troubled waters of Mohamedan confusion.<sup>43</sup>

History as we have seen in Chapter II had already been converted into a contentious site for resolving contemporary conflicts through a recollection of Maratha and Rajput heroic feats. Ranade's efforts complemented by Tilak's Hindu Shivaji festival gave the discourse on Hindu heroism an aggressive edge by identifying both

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<sup>43</sup>M.G. Ranade, The Rise of Maratha Power, Girgaum, 1900, p. 8.

the Muslims and the British as usurpers of a legitimate Hindu dharma-raiya.

In Calcutta the Shivaji festival was instituted in 1902, by Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, a follower of Tilak who wrote extensively in Bengali about the Maratha hero. Writing about Shivaji's coronation in 1902, Deuskar stressed the need for a different kind of history-writing that would create the space for the inclusion of heroes such as Shivaji:

The fact that patriotic Bengali Hindus, irrespective of their sects, have comprehended the purity of the festival and participated in it, is a sign that portends the future prosperity of Hindus... There are no comprehensive descriptions of this glorious event that honours the Hindu race in English texts.<sup>44</sup>

Deuskar's history of the Maratha domination based itself on the Marathi bakhars or chronicles as well as perhaps M.G. Ranade's history. Later, in 1904, Deuskar condemned the present-day socio-economic structure - a result of colonial exploitation - that had destroyed the possibility of creating a heroic self-image.<sup>45</sup> Deuskar's critique of the colonial economy based itself on the reorganisation of elements of historiography that could represent a nationalist self-image and Shivaji came to symbolise the balance between the intellectual and the spiritual which stood for an unified Hindu heroism. Speaking at the 1902 celebrations Bipin Chandra Pal stressed the 'essentially spiritual' dimensions of the Shivaji movement.<sup>46</sup> The contemporary Muslim press, however, saw this excessive preoccupation with Shivaji

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<sup>44</sup>Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, 'Shibajir Rajyabhishek', Sahitya, Vol X:4, 1902, p. 210.

<sup>45</sup>See Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar, Deshar Katha, ('About the Country'), 1904, 4th ed., Calcutta, 1907.

<sup>46</sup>Bipin Chandra Pal, 'The Sivaji Festival' in Swadeshi and Swaraj: The Rise of New Patriotism, Calcutta, 1954, pp. 81-2.



as an attempt to alienate the Muslim population of Bengal. The depiction of Shivaji in contemporary drama was construed as 'a strong exhibition of Hindu animosity against the Musalmans'.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps in reaction to this Bipin Chandra Pal's subsequent speech at the Shivaji festival of 1903 stressed the universal aspect of his Hindu symbol of resistance with the added emphasis on the inclusiveness of the term Hindu:

In honouring Shivaji we honour that Hindu ideal. But in doing so we do not desire in the least to separate ourselves from the other Indian communities. We do not forget that Modern India belongs not merely to the Hindus, nor to the Hindus and Mahomedans alone, but to all the different races that compose its vast and varied population to-day.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Bipin Chandra Pal's proclamation, the basic Hindu structure of such festivals alienated the Muslim majority of Bengal. In 1905, the Soltan, edited by Muhammad Nazir Uddin Ahmad, stated: 'we see clearly that the men who are now being worshipped as deities by the Hindus were in all cases rebels against the constituted Musalman Government of their times.'<sup>49</sup>

As a symbol of heroic resistance, the figure of Shivaji widely appealed to the Hindu sections of the Bengali intelligentsia. Despite his differences with Pal's aggressive Hinduism,<sup>50</sup> Rabindranath Tagore too had written a poem about the

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<sup>47</sup>Mihir O Sudhakar, 7 November 1902, in RNP, No. 46 of 1902, pp. 691-2.

<sup>48</sup>Bipin Chandra Pal, 'The Sivaji Festival' 1903, Swadeshi and Swaraj, pp. 86-7.

<sup>49</sup>The report names Shivaji, Pratapaditya and Sitaram Ray. Soltan, 10 February 1905, RNP, No. 7 of 1905, p. 157.

<sup>50</sup>Writing to Pulin Bihari Sen on 20 November 1937, Tagore recalled Bipin Chandra Pal requesting him to write a song that would address the goddess of the Motherland as goddess Durga. Tagore wrote: 'I disagreed and said that I cannot feel such a devotion sincerely ... I had composed 'Bhubanamanomohini' (literally, 'enchantress of the world'); needless to say this song was not suitable for the occasion of the Puja. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the song is unsuitable for any All-India gathering, because this poem takes from the

Maratha hero at Deuskar's request.<sup>51</sup> The poem celebrated the notion of a united dharma-rajya which Shivaji represented. Urging the Bengalis to unite with the Maharashtrians, the poem recalled the patriotism of Shivaji - the great spiritual unifier of India.<sup>52</sup>

The theme of the dauntless Maratha hero was thus given a militant edge. Through this historical analogy British power could be challenged in the way Shivaji had confronted Mughal/Muslim authority. The theme of the heroic motherland was also contemporaneous with Shivaji's nationalist heroism. Shivaji's resistance was always enunciated with specific reference to a glorious Motherland. Quite typically, in July 1905, the Pratijna published a poem about an imaginary dialogue between Shivaji and his mentor Guru Ram Das. Instructed by his master, Shivaji has a vision of the resplendent figure of Mother India, who stood armed with a sword. Her words to the Maratha hero echo the aggressiveness of revolutionary Swadeshi: 'This the one truth on earth.' Shivaji also heard a chorus of gods and goddesses singing around the figure of Mother India, and 'extolling the sword as the redresser of all wrongs, the preserver of home, of prosperity, and generally of almost all that man values in life.'<sup>53</sup>

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Hindu tradition.' Quoted in Prashanta Kumar Pal, Rabi-Jibani: Chaturtha Khanda, 1301-1307, Vol IV, 1894-1901, ('The Biography of Rabindranath Tagore: Vol IV') Calcutta: 1988, p. 124.

<sup>51</sup>Prashanta Kumar Pal, Rabi Jibani: Pancham Khanda, 1308-1314, Vol V, 1901-08, ('The Biography of Rabindranatha Tagore: Vol V'), Calcutta, 1990, pp. 202-3.

<sup>52</sup>Yogindra Nath Sarkar, Bande Mataram, ('Hail to the Mother'), 1905, 6th ed., Calcutta, 1908, pp. 195-9.

<sup>53</sup>Pratijna, 26 July 1905, in RNP, No.30 of 1905, p. 733.

This emphasis on aggressive physical power that had to be analogically exercised in the present context was an attempt to validate the oppositional sense of history which had so far relegated physical prowess to the distant past.<sup>54</sup> The preoccupation with Shivaji's heroism in many ways shared a continuity with Bankim's sense of history for, apart from his resistance to Muslim rule, Shivaji like the santans was devoted to a mother-goddess, Bhawani.

A growing awareness of the changing nature of colonial rule linking British policy with India's poverty, expressed itself in economic critiques of colonial policy by Dadabhai Naoroji, Ranade and R.C. Dutt. Within the discourse of cultural identity this awareness expressed itself in attempts to make the identity thus engendered more aggressive and political. This was voiced not only in Tilak's political festivals which reshaped cultural events in Bengal, but also in the way in which the significance of motherhood in the nationalist project came to be redefined. The Partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi movement both played a part in transforming the figure of passive and suffering motherhood into an active and militant figure.

### **Victoria and Mother India**

As we have seen in Chapter III, of the multiple meanings attributed to motherhood,

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<sup>54</sup>As Ranajit Guha has pointed out in his discussion of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's historical writings, the force of ideology operating on the concept of bahubal or physical prowess 'had brought about a series of displacements to make the Musalman rather than the British the object of bahubal and the remote, pre-colonial past rather than the recent, colonial past its temporal site.' Ranajit Guha, An Indian Historiography of India: A Nineteenth-Century Agenda and its Implications, Calcutta, 1988, p. 67.

the depiction of Empress Victoria as mother made her a figure difficult to ignore. Her loss of place from the trinity of motherhood was paralleled by a reappropriation of image of the Bharat Mata in terms of heroic womanhood.

Victoria's disappearance from the defining arena of motherhood was not totally rooted in the death that brought her reign to an end. Rather it was directly related to the changing priorities of British rule. As has been argued in Chapter III, even in her lifetime Victoria was too remote to be in any sense a real presence. Her formidable presence in India had to do with other qualities that were attributed to her. As David Cannadine has shown in his study of British monarchy, her 'longevity, probity, sense of duty and unrivalled position as matriarch of Europe and mother-figure of empire' surpassed all earlier animosity.<sup>55</sup>

Together with her appeal as a mother-figure, in Bengal a less-noted component of her appeal, as we have shown in Chapter III, was an appropriation of the empress as the ideal of Hindu womanhood. Indeed, it was as an ideal Hindu woman that she was remembered within this discourse. In an elegy written after her death on 22 January 1901, by Satish Chandra Mukherjee, the editor of The Dawn, the loss of the 'Loved Mother' was mourned in these terms:

I looked/ On Thee on Earth, as like a distant Orb/Of Light...  
For Thou wast Hindu! In spirit, self-forgotten, self-forgiving,/ Compassionate,  
and Thy Feet should fitly/ Have touched India's strand, the land of Sages,/ Self-less, e'en now, wearing uncouth mantles/ And speaking uncouth tongues reckoned barbarous./ Thou wast not Loved Mother! an alien/ To us; the diadem of an Empress/ Little suited Thee; India's Children/ Are drawn by

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<sup>55</sup>David Cannadine, 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition', c. 1820-1977' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition, 1983, Cambridge, rpt., 1988, p. 121.

Love, - whose highest deities/ Are deities of Love, and Thy own Christ? Is ours also by the Power of Love!<sup>56</sup>

The essential spiritual India, created by the Hindu discourse to contain all faiths, thus accommodated the distant English empress. As has been argued in Chapter III, this construction of Victoria was a necessary part of the nationalist elites's self-representation. Therefore, the important dimension of faith in Victoria was reiterated in the context of the political crisis that followed the Partition. Yet it was this very faith that would constitute a part of the violent break with former trust and loyalty. Commenting on this important factor that guided Indian life in the recent past, Bipin Chandra Pal said:

It was the custom in those days to think of everything Indian in terms of English life. If there was a great man among us, say Kalidasa ... he must be either a Shakespeare or a Milton or a Byron or a Shelley... That was the mental attitude of the Indian people then, and on account of this peculiar mental attitude, we looked about for our political documents and found this precious document in the Queen's Proclamation... We could repeat it from memory with all punctuation from beginning to end.<sup>57</sup>

In 1905 Victoria forfeited her place from the trinity of motherhood with Curzon's dismissal of her 1858 proclamation as an 'impossible charter'.<sup>58</sup> In fact, Curzon's interpretation of the Charter which deviated so much from the meaning that 'generations of administrators and the entire body of Indian people [had] put upon it'<sup>59</sup>, made Victoria's commitment into a qualified promise. This change in attitude of

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<sup>56</sup>Satishchandra Mukherjee 'In Memorium' The Dawn, 1901, Vol IV: No.6, pp. 162-3.

<sup>57</sup>Bipin Chandra Pal 'The New Movement' in Swadeshi and Swaraj, pp. 127-8.

<sup>58</sup>This is discussed elaborately in nos.12 & 14 of the RNP Bengal, 1905.

<sup>59</sup>Amrita Bazar Patrika, 19 May 1905, in Report II on the Native-Owned Newspapers Bengal, No. 21 of 1905, p. 192.

the colonisers was matched by the changing attitude of Indians to British rule. The shift in attitude ushered in by nationalism was part of a wider phenomenon within which was included arguments for political and economic autonomy. The figure of the benevolent empress was no longer seen as an appropriate vehicle of a putative self-image in terms of leadership. Victoria thus became divested of earlier comparisons with Hindu mythological characters. Despite the fact that Indians like Pal 'could repeat from memory', her proclamation of 1858, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, the sannyasi editor of Sandhya reminded his readers that 'the promise made by Queen is not like that made by Raja Dasaratha to Kaikeyi, and that therefore on the strength of that promise they cannot demand what may be called the banishment of the English and the giving of the throne to the natives.'<sup>60</sup> Indeed it was Curzon's disclaimer, the Partition of Bengal and the confrontational nationalist politics of this period that brought about a crisis in the discourse on motherhood and nationalism. Remarking on the coronation festivities to be held in Delhi in 1902, the Hitavadi discusses the lack of opportunity for less privileged Indians to participate in terms of a metaphor of maternity:

Of the lambs which have the same ewe for their mother, no more than two can suck at the same time, and, while some thus fill themselves with milk, others leap about to their heart's content. We, too are not permitted to enjoy the milk and must content ourselves with only leaping and dancing.<sup>61</sup>

Within the contentious field of motherhood and nationalism was now inscribed the desire to know and cherish one's own mother as against the earlier worship of

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<sup>60</sup>Sandhya, 31 March 1905, RNP Bengal, No. 15 of 1905, p. 370.

<sup>61</sup>Hitavadi 20 June 1902, in RNP Bengal, No.26 of 1902, p. 372.

another's mother. The aggressively Hindu Bangabasi represented Mother Bengal as 'warning her children against the bewitching charms of their step-mother, England, who tempts them like a witch, with the magic performances of science and makes rich men poor and poor men rich.'<sup>62</sup> Even as another dimension of the nationalist discourse saw in the progress of science the progress of India, in articulating the theme of motherhood the Hindu discourse saw the lure of technology in terms of witchcraft.

From 1905 onwards the figure of Victoria was replaced by the figure of Mother England who unlike the imperial matriarch, was an impostor - a false mother. This construction persisted in other discursive forms. Amrita Lal Basu playwright and theatre-personality of this period, also depicted Mother England as a witch-like figure in his play Sabas Bangali written in 1905. A song sung by young boys in the play says of Mother England: 'That dame must be a witch?/ Or why does she flaunt her affection more than the Mother,/ This wench just hopes to bring up/ And suck our blood, later!'.<sup>63</sup>

In Yogindranath Sarkar's anthology of ninety-seven nationalist songs, Bande Mataram,<sup>64</sup> numerous songs depicted Mother India as a woman who had been deprived even of the affection of her own sons. Rabindranath Tagore's famous song

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<sup>62</sup>The Bangavasi, 16 September 1905, RNP Bengal, No.38 of 1905, p. 928.

<sup>63</sup>Amrita Lal Basu, Sabas Bangali! ('Bravo Bengalis!') in Amrita Granthabali, Part II, Calcutta, 1910, p. 103.

<sup>64</sup>Sumit Sarkar points out that this book went through three editions in the course of the month of September 1905, and the fourth was published the following March. Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement, p. 290.

spoke of this same neglect:

O Mother why do you gaze at my face so?  
They do not seem to want you, Oh Mother!  
They know not their own Mother!<sup>65</sup>

Another famous song of this period, popular even today, and composed by Dwijendralal Roy implies a neglect on the part of the children of the motherland:

Oh My Bengal! Oh my Mother! O giver of Life! My Land!  
Oh Mother what has made your gaze wither and why is your hair unkempt?  
Why are you seated on this dusty seat and why oh Mother are you clad in dull rags?  
[Why this state] - when seven million children loudly proclaim you 'My country!'<sup>66</sup>

Another declared that Indians had forgotten their ancient heritage and had after a long period of disregard at long last come to recognise their own mother.<sup>67</sup>

A figure that had co-existed with the victimised Mother India since the inception of the Hindu Mela was the bir-mata - the heroic mother. This together with the already existing worship of shakti - as Durga in Bengal, meant that the notion of a female power or shakti had attained a polysemic quality. The political crisis which followed in the wake of the Partition of Bengal brought about a further transformation - a typical example of which is an essay titled Matri-Puja written in 1905, by Jyotirindra Nath Tagore. This essay saw each physical attribute of the goddess Durga in terms of nationalist symbols and so endowed them with an altered significance:

At the core [of the Durga Image] is Mahashakti (literally, Great Power') - i.e.,

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<sup>65</sup>Yogindranath Sarkar, Bande Mataram, 1905, Calcutta, 6th ed., 1908, p. 85.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>67</sup>'We now know our real mother,/ We've now found a soothing place.' quoted in Ibid., p. 188.



the concentrated power of the country. Durga, the destroyer of the enemy, mounts the lion - i.e., the power of self-reliance - and with the aid of firm confidence - is crushing the inauspicious demons - the Asuras.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, Jyotirindranath's elaboration of the figure, tied the image more firmly to the Swadeshi imagination with its stress on the 'boycott' and on the importance of leadership:

The goddess Lakshmi and the god Ganesh stand on one side of this Maha Shakti - they signify expansion and achievement. Agriculture and enterprise lie at the heart of this expansion ... To be successful in any great enterprise you need people as well as the leader ... The leader of the people must have discretion as well as knowledge ... Similarly on the other side of Durga stand Saraswati and Kartika - i.e., Knowledge and Strength.<sup>69</sup>

It was with support from all these significant attributes of the goddess that victory could be ensured. Hindu religious imagery thus became transformed into an allegory for politics as Jyotirindranath went on:

Therefore, if we keep religion in mind and worship Expansion, Achievement, Knowledge and Strength when we venerate this Maha Shakti - we can establish this goddess of our Motherland in our hearts - then there would be no need for the immersion ceremony.<sup>70</sup>

Once again the means deployed for the validation of the Motherland as goddess is that of remembering a distant past. This past - far from being the immediate past was situated in the Puranic landscape where the goddess Durga in her resplendent glory overthrew the dark and evil forces. The choice of the allegorical form significantly indicated the needs of the present moment which had to be fulfilled

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<sup>68</sup>Jyotirindra Nath Tagore 'Matri-Puja', ('The Worship of the Mother'), Bhandar, Sept-Oct, 1905, p. 236.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

before it could reconstitute past state of harmony.<sup>71</sup>

As we have shown in Chapter III, the figure of the Bharat Mata had multiple aspects in the nineteenth century. Two important shifts in the way she is represented mark the beginning of the Swadeshi period. Even as Victoria was replaced by the glorious Bharat Mata, the earlier depiction of the Bharat Mata as a victim figure was also substituted with a heroic figure.

In many ways, Amrita Lal's Naba Jiban (1901) incorporated the earlier play, Bharat Mata by Kiran Chandra Bandyopadhyay. As we have seen in our discussion of the earlier play, in Chapter III, the Bharat Lakshmi had departed from the degenerated land of Bharat. In Nabajiban, Amritalal portrayed her as returning, singing the same song by Dwijendranath Tagore - 'Oh Bharat your countenance is like the fading moon.' By contrast to the inactive sons of the Bharat Mata of the earlier play, here her sons awaken and beg forgiveness and her daughters to come forth to pledge their commitment.<sup>72</sup>

If the politics of the period marked a change in the depiction of the Motherland, it also emphasised the sons of the Motherland as the agents of change. Although, inevitably, the Bengali sons roused from slumber and ready to take the boycott pledge were perceived to be the agents of change, as in the earlier play, attention was often focused on the 'good' English sympathiser, who stood in

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<sup>71</sup>A reinterpretation of Puranic themes in the light of contemporary politics persisted during the Swadeshi period. The most remarkable example was the play Matri Puja, by Kunjabihari Gangopadhyay. First performed in 1907, it attracted an audience of 4,000 people. Kunjabihari Gangopadhyay, Matri Puja, Calcutta, 1908.

<sup>72</sup>See Naba Jiban in Amrita Lal Granthabali, Part II, pp. 117-134.

reproachful contrast to the corrupted specimens who prevailed in India. In a play dedicated to Swadeshi activists, performed at the New Classic Theatre, Mr Naylor, who is a Member of Parliament and a 'pure sahib', is depicted as exclaiming:

Adeiu to thee, oh India! Mother of Budha[sic!], Chaitanya and other innumerable sages! Count me as one of your admiring friends and allow me to employ each drop of blood that runs into my veins to wipe off thy miseries and to fight for thy cause.[Shouts of 'Bande Mataram' heard in the background] ... Cry and cry out boys! until your voice fails. Leave not the sacred name and forget not your mother-land, the most blessed land in the world... A Christian as I am, in the name of the Lord Jesus I promise I will have your wrongs avenged and tyrants punished.<sup>73</sup>

So a remarkable shift had obviously taken place since the performance of Bharat Mata in 1872. While the earlier play enlisted the figure of Lord Northbrook as a representative of Mother Victoria herself and hence a deliverer, Mr Naylor was represented as regarding the group of 'Bande Mataram' boys as the real saviours, thus reducing himself to the position of helper. This transformation in the nationalist self-perception was related to Victoria's exit from the arena of motherhood that had earlier aided in defining the nationalist self. But the formulation of heroic motherhood in preference to the victim figure also contained inherent contradictions. This contradiction expressed itself in the participation envisioned for women as the Hindu discourse faced the political crisis of the Partition of Bengal.

### Heroism and the Role of the Woman

The notion of abstract female power or shakti, as we have seen directed the gendering

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<sup>73</sup>Surendranath Basu Desh Guljar: Swadeshi Naksa, Calcutta, 2nd Edition 1906, p. 66.

of the Hindu discourse. The politics of the Swadeshi movement also allocated a specific role to women. In Rabindranath Tagore's novel Ghare Baire published in 1916, with the turbulent Swadeshi period as its setting, the heroine Bimala oversteps the limits of womanhood by imagining herself as the shakti that inspires and also unleashes a corrupted masculinity in Sandip. Bimala, who is drawn by Sandip's fiery nationalism, sees herself transformed in her own self-perception:

Listening to his allegories, I had forgotten that I was plain and simple Bimala. I was Shakti ... Nothing could fetter me, nothing was impossible for me; whatever I touched would gain new life. The world around me was a fresh creation of mine... And this hero, this true servant of the country, this devotee of mine, - this flaming intelligence, this burning energy, this shining genius, - him also was I creating from moment to moment. Have I not seen how my presence pours fresh life into him time after time?<sup>74</sup>

The crisis was brought about because, as Jashodhara Bagchi points out: 'womanhood in developing its full Affective Self inside the home is suddenly faced with the challenge of the 'World' in the form of Swadeshi extremist politics.'<sup>75</sup> Further, in relating Bimala's fate to Tagore's deep fears of the spirit of nationalism, Bagchi indicates the crisis that lay at the core of the gendered discourse of the Swadeshi movement. The conceptualisation of the besieged nation as a mother included her sons as participants in the violence of agitational self-definition but excluded her daughters. Even as abstract feminine essences shaped inspirational

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<sup>74</sup>Rabindranath Tagore, The Home and the World, Surendranath Tagore trans., London, 1921, pp. 143-4.

<sup>75</sup>Jashodhara Bagchi, 'Feminism and Nationalism: Tagore's Ghare Baire' in K. Radha (ed.), Feminism and Literature Trivandrum, 1987, p. 4.

figures like Abanindranath's painting of the ethereal Bharat Mata,<sup>76</sup> in real terms daughters were later expected to blossom into heroic mothers capable of a different sacrifice.

The preoccupation with women and heroic womanhood during the Swadeshi movement becomes easier to understand if the political crisis that ensued from the Partition of Bengal is understood as a moment that shaped and directed the evolving Hindu discourse. The principles of gender deployed within ceremonies that articulated an indigenous self-recovery were principles that guided the Hindu discourse. Sarala Debi stood within this same tradition: for even as she designed rituals and ceremonies for Bengali boys, she also envisioned the women of Bengal as a part of shakti - the great female force that moves the universe. However, according to Sarala Debi, in the contemporary context, they were hardly the spouses of brave men, for, she reasoned, in contemporary times, unlike the time of the great epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, women who travel on the roads, by trains or boats could no longer rest in the tranquil knowledge that her husband is her courageous protector.<sup>77</sup> By implication, valour was not something that existed in contemporary society even though it might have existed in the past. However, with some effort put into the

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<sup>76</sup>For a discussion of this figure painted by Abanindranath, see Ratnabali Chattopadhyay, 'Nationalism and Form in Indian Painting: A Study of the Bengal School', Journal of Arts and Ideas, Nos. 14-15, July-December 1987, pp. 5-46. For a study of the Bengal School within the context of changes that came about in form, practice and definition of Indian art in colonial Bengal, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal c.1850-1920, Cambridge, 1992.

<sup>77</sup>Sarala Debi, 'Bangali Paray', ('In a Bengali locale'), in Bharati, September-October, 1903, p. 622.

mothering of the child, this lost quality could be recovered in the next generation.

Indicating this in a section of the same piece entitled 'The Difference in Expressing Love', she wrote:

It is not known how love for children was expressed in ancient India. But in the west, the friends of the mother always say of a child: 'Isn't he heavy! Isn't he big!' whereas Bengali mothers say: 'Oh dear! My poor darling is all skin and bones!'. As a result the Bengali child, learns to look upon himself as a pitiable creature from the moment of birth. therefore, when some Hindusthani sees a Bengali being beaten by a fellow Hindusthani, he says: 'Let him be! He's only a Bengali!' and instead of being fired with rage at the insult, the unfortunate darling remembers the utterances of his mother, his aunts and grandmother: 'Oh our poor darling is so thin!' - and he weeps in self-pity. When will our mothers teach their darlings to say like Lava, the son of Sita, 'How dare you pity me!'<sup>78</sup>

She thus transformed the traditional devoted and suffering wife-image of Sita into an exemplary image of a strong mother. Sarala Debi herself however, was an exceptional public figure who transcended the limitations of her gender-role. Treated like a special child with indulgence and hardly expected to participate in the activities of the antahpur, Sarala Debi's significant contribution to this discourse on the recovery of heroism was fulfilled according to contemporary agendas set for women by men.<sup>79</sup> Sarala Debi's efforts comprised a relocation of heroism within Bengal and at the same time, confined women's role to the mothering of heroes.

The Swadeshi movement also illustrates for us another important dimension of the Hindu discourse at the moment of political crisis. A confrontation with this crisis exposed the inner contradictions within the construction of female icons of

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p.618.

<sup>79</sup>For a brief discussion of Sarala Debi's life and perceptions see Malavika Karlekar, Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women, Delhi, 1991.

resistance. The dichotomy between the heroic mother and the figure of women as intercessors was made explicit in the Swadeshi movement. On the one hand, the mothering of heroes as emphasised by Sarala Debi was reiterated in songs popularised during this period. For example, Dwarakanath Gangopadhyay, the editor of Abalabandhab, urged the women of Bengal in song:

Rise Oh sisters!! And become wives and mothers of the brave/  
Instruct your offspring,/ As you nurse them at your breast/  
In legends heroic!! So that the blood vibrates with pride as it flows in their veins!<sup>80</sup>

On the other hand, women were also perceived as weak and incapable of sacrificing luxuries. They were expected to pray for spiritual strength to overcome their desires for fine foreign cloth and bangles, for it was their desires that stood in the way of the male Swadeshi activists. As a famous song of this period addressing women puts it:

Leave your glass bangles, Oh women of Bengal,  
Never wear them again!  
Wake O Mothers and Sisters!  
Awake from this trance!  
.....  
Hark Mother Bengal calls out:  
'Awake O my Daughters!  
If you take a pledge my wealth need never leave the land!  
For I am poor and unfortunate  
And do not get even two meals in a day,  
Alas! what have I deteriorated into -  
And none of you have spared a thought!<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Yogendranath Sarkar, Bande Mataram, p. 136.

<sup>81</sup>Song composed by Manomohan Chakrabarty, quoted in Hemendra Prasad Ghosh, Kangres, ('Congress), 1920, 3rd ed., Calcutta, 1928, p.166.

While women were thus addressed in song, advertisements that appeared in contemporary newspapers during the Durga Puja festival appealed to the male householders not to allow the women to indulge in foreign finery.<sup>82</sup> Another advertisement which appealed directly to women had as its signatories, among others, Ananda Mohun Bose, S.N. Banerjee, Matilal Ghosh and Rabindranath Tagore. This petition entreated Bengali sisters to remember on the occasion of the Bhatri-Dvitiya festival - when sisters traditionally invite brothers and pray for their welfare - the suffering millions who are their brothers by virtue of being sons of the Motherland. It urged the sisters to donate something towards the welfare of those who had become brothers following the Rakhi-bandhan festival. Rakhi-bandhan - the ceremonial tying of the sacred thread of brotherhood - became a commemorative ceremony to observe the Partition of Bengal. The newspaper appeal included a pledge to be undertaken by the participating women - a pledge in the name of the Motherland, to give up extravagant expenditure on religious or social ceremonies, and to donate any savings acquired in this manner to the cause of the country.<sup>83</sup>

Solicitations such as these once again point to the hegemonic aspect of this discourse as it sought to draw the upper and middle-class women into its fold.

Contemporary newspapers carried special notices about eminent Bengali ladies who

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<sup>82</sup>A letter which appeared in the Basumati, 23 September 1905, signed by Surendranath Banerjee, Hirendranath Datta, Matilal Ghose and others, entreated householders: 'We earnestly request and pray with joined hands that, for the sake of the welfare of the land of your birth, which is more glorious to one than heaven itself, you should not on this occasion purchase anything of foreign manufacture.' Quoted in RNP Bengal, No. 39 of 1905, p. 961.

<sup>83</sup>The Bengalee, 29 October, 1905, p. 6.



were participating in boycott. While the Sanjivani listed ways in which wives of zamindars were trying to persuade their tenants and subordinates to use 'country-made' articles.<sup>84</sup>

At another level these ideas about the limits of women's participation were complemented by the redesigning of rituals specifically for women. Here again, what underlay the bratas or rituals specifically designed for women was the assumption that the most appropriate role for women in the movement was that of the virtuous mediator - who could intercede with the gods.

While Sumanta Banerjee has argued that the internal mechanics of the educated Bengali male elite had segregated the world of the middle-class women from the world of folklore and ritual,<sup>85</sup> the return of such marginalised ritual forms during the Swadeshi period, indicates the revitalisation of a tradition that coexisted perhaps within the patriarchal values of bhadralok mores. Thus on 16 October 1905, on the day of the Partition, a refashioned panchali or ritual poem was read out publicly before a gathering of women. This redesigned ritual: Banga Lakshmir Bratakatha written by Ramendra Sundar Tribedi and first published in Banga Darshan the same year, reworked elements of an available Hindu ritual into a nationalist ceremony for women.

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<sup>84</sup>The names mentioned are Srimati Dinamani Chaudhurani, Zamindar of Santosh of Mymensingh and the widow of the late Lakshman Chandar Aush Chaudhuri, Zamindar of Mangalganj. Sanjivani 24 August 1905, in RNP Bengal, No. 35 of 1905, p. 851.

<sup>85</sup>See Sumanta Banerjee, The Parlour and the Street, Calcutta, 1989. Also his 'The Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal', in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women, pp. 127-79.

Beginning with the proclamation 'Bande Mataram' - 'Hail to the Mother' - a cry taken up by Swadeshi activists from the santans of Bankim's Ananda Math, the text delineated three moments of crisis in the past. These three moments incorporated the three periods of Bengali history and reiterated the periodisation which we have discussed in Chapter II. Lakshmi, the goddess of Bengal's fortunes, is traditionally a goddess perturbed by distressing circumstances. Distress visits her in the form of social degeneration in the ancient period, Muslim persecution in the medieval period and finally in the form of British destruction of Bengali self-hood. The problems were sorted out during the ancient period by summoning the Brahmans of Kanauj to reside in Bengal; while during the Muslim period, the intervention of Hussain Shah reinstated the goddess among both Hindus and Muslims. With the British take-over, the goddess is perturbed once more. For, as the text emphasised: 'The people of Bengal lost their senses. The old began to behave like children and play childishly with the toys given them by the British.'<sup>86</sup>

The climax, however, had now come with Curzon's Partition of Bengal. While the text constructed the first two moments of crises symmetrically with the rulers eradicating Lakshmi's cause of discontent, in the third moment of crisis the agents of recovery were seen to be Bengalis themselves. This brata, then was constructed according to the logic of the Hindu discourse. It prescribed that women symbolically mark the calender by observing this ritual annually on the day of the Partition. It also urged the childish Bengalis to grow up and become men, for only men and not infants

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<sup>86</sup> Ramendra Sundar Tribedi, Banga Lakshmir Brata in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajani Kanta Das (eds.), Ramendra-Rachanabali Part I, Calcutta, 1959, p. 487.

could command and administer the world. Through their ritualised recollection, women were perceived as helping the male members of Bengali society to gradually regain their control over their social, political and economic world.

Another significant shift marked the later deepening of political crisis after 1905. Women's heroism earlier restricted to the mothering of heroes was now depicted in terms of suffering the brutal loss of her sons who sacrificed themselves for the nationalist cause. As in the earlier period, heroic mothers were now asked to prepare for a different kind of sacrifice - the sacrifice of the Swadeshi son for the cause of the country. This mode of heroic endurance became the feminine counterpart of courageous sacrifice. As Kartik Chandra Dasgupta, a less eminent poet of this period put it:

They want the blood of infants, they're after infant blood!  
The present test is a tough one,  
Oh ye Padmavatis of my country!  
Approach this spectacle of the sacrifice of your sons,  
Oh Mothers!  
Leave your wails and sobs oh mothers!  
Leave them for the antahpur!  
Approach the battle-field in the garb of a warrior!  
[For] they're after infant blood.<sup>87</sup>

This poem explicitly indicated another avenue open to heroic motherhood. Not only were mothers expected to nurture sons with a sense of pride, valour and self-sacrifice, their own contribution lay in their strength to sacrifice their sons in an impassioned tribute to their Motherland.

If the Motherland depended on heroic maternity for sustenance, the male

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<sup>87</sup>Kartik Chandra Dasgupta, 'Oder Shishur Rakta Chai' in Nabya Bharat, Vol XIV, July-Aug 1906, p. 165.

participants in the Swadeshi movement were perceived as fulfilling a complementary role in this heroic agenda. The nourishment they provided for the Motherland was also envisaged in terms of sacrifice.<sup>88</sup>

### **Masculinity and the Evolution of the Swadeshi Sannyasi**

We have attempted to demonstrate in Chapter IV, the process by which Vivekananda's alternative masculinity came to be formulated. The icon of a redefined sannyasi had a tremendous appeal for the Swadeshi nationalists and it is to some aspects of this appeal that we shall now turn. This icon encapsulated an oppositional masculinity that had a significant resonance in the face of colonial denigration of the weak Bengali.

In a report on the Ramakrishna Mission prepared by Charles Tegart, Special Superintendent of the Police, Intelligence Branch, Calcutta, in 1914,<sup>89</sup> Vivekananda's appeal was analysed in great detail. Although, according to Tegart, 'there is not much that can be called directly political in the lectures of Swami Vivekananda. [He] endeavoured to unite his countrymen and awaken in them a sense of their power, as exemplified in their ancient history, through Vedanta philosophy which taught the

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<sup>88</sup> David Gilmore commenting on the relationship between masculinity and nurturance has pointed out that while, 'Women nurture others directly. They do this with their bodies, with their milk and their love. This is very sacrificial and generous. But surprisingly, "real" men nurture, too, although they would perhaps not be pleased to hear it put this way. Their support is indirect and thus easy to conceptualize. Men nurture their society by shedding blood, their sweat, and their semen'. See David D. Gilmore, Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity, New Haven, 1990, pp. 229-30.

<sup>89</sup> Tegart Report, Confidential No. 5481/322-14 I.B. Full text quoted in Shankari Prasad Basu, Vivekananda O Samakalin Bharatbarsha, Vol V, Calcutta, 2nd., ed 1985, pp. 230-338.

equality of all men'.<sup>90</sup> For Tegart, the significance of Vivekananda's mission lay in his 'man-making' mission. Discussing Vivekananda's lecture entitled 'Modern India' in great detail, Tegart stressed that

The lecturer concludes by saying 'O Thou Mother of Strength, take away my weakness, take away my unmanliness, and *make me a man* ... enough has perhaps been said to show how the main principles of the Swami's teachings appealed to the revolutionary party of the present day and how they have been able to use his sayings and writings to sow the seeds of revolution and anarchy in the minds of Indian youths.'<sup>91</sup>

The threat contained in this 'man-making project' came to be embodied by the Swadeshi activists of Bengal. Reiterating Tegart's Report, the Report of the Sedition Committee in 1918, with Justice Rowlatt as President, saw Vivekananda's mission as well as the exhortations of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita as influencing and inspiring the beginnings of the revolutionary movement in Bengal.<sup>92</sup>

These links between Vivekananda's 'man-making project' and terrorist activities, were also affirmed by the Bengal Revolutionaries themselves. Hemchandra Ghose had recollected for Bhupendranath Datta, Vivekananda's younger brother, the impact the Swami had on the youth in Dacca (Dhaka) in 1901: 'Swami Vivekananda appeared to us to be more a political prophet than a religious teacher ... with the books of Bankimchandra and Vivekananda we set out on our pilgrimage for the temple of Liberty with heart within and God overhead'.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>91</sup>Emphasis in original. Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>92</sup>Sedition Committee 1918: Report, Calcutta, 1918, p. 17.

<sup>93</sup>Quoted in Bhupendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda: Patriot Prophet, A Study, Calcutta, 1954, p. 335.

On the other hand embittered revolutionaries like Hemchandra Kanungo later criticised the unfortunate Hindu inspiration behind their activities: 'to establish the monopoly of Hinduism, not only in India but all over the world especially in England and America - this became the purpose and political freedom was the means to this end ... it was Vivekananda who had first taught us [to take on] this vain challenge.'<sup>94</sup>

In official reports too, the connection between Vivekananda's 'man-making project' and terrorism was explained in terms of the spiritual appeal terrorism held for Hindus in Bengal. Summarising the situation in 1932, Charles Tegart explained in an address to the Royal Empire Society: 'I would like to impress on you ... that terrorism ... is essentially a Hindu movement'.<sup>95</sup> However, as the earlier the Report of the Sedition Committee had made clear, a strong emphasis on spirituality guided the formation of secret societies in Bengal. However, the appeal of this spirituality was addressed to the bhadralok - the class from which Swadeshi activists like Barindra Kumar Ghosh hailed: 'The agitation was Hindu and also drew its strength from the bhadralok'.<sup>96</sup>

As we have demonstrated in Chapter I, the participation of the bhadralok in the colonial cultural politics was a hegemonic project. The appeal of the Swadeshi movement to a large section of its urban participants lay in continuities with the Hindu cultural identity. Furthermore, the identity and the culture that sustained the terrorist's

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<sup>94</sup>Hemchandra Kanungo, Banglay Biplab Prachesta, ('The Revolutionary Effort in Bengal'), Calcutta, 1928, p. 244.

<sup>95</sup>Charles Tegart, Terrorism in India, New Delhi, 1983, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup>Sedition Committee Report, p. 19.

self-definition was linked by certain themes deployed by a self-descriptive Hindu discourse. The theme of the heroic mother which we have discussed had a meaningful correlate in the theme of masculinity which pertained to her sons.

Two momentous events directed the insistence on masculinity during this period. The Partition of Bengal in 1905, carried out despite protests by Bengalis, was perceived as an affront to their masculinity. The newspaper Hitavadi said: 'We are degenerated creatures devoid of manliness. That is why Lord Curzon's despotism is flowing on in an uninterrupted course.'<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, as Charles Tegart observed, 'Bengali acceptance of the insult was contrasted with the brilliant valour shown by Japan against one of the proudest of European nations.'<sup>98</sup> Japan's triumph in the war with Russia was identified this triumph as the victory of an Asian power over an European one. This had pedagogical implications for the 'weak' Bengalis. As the Amrita Bazar Patrika, put it: 'with such short military training and experience and with the physique of the Bengali peasant, the Japanese have fought so successfully with the mightiest power on earth.'<sup>99</sup> Parallels with Hindus were also extended in Brahmabandhab Upadhyay's Sandhya which reminded its readers that 'no braver people are to be found ... than ... the Asiatics, especially the Hindus'.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>Hitavadi, 28 July 1905, RNP, No. 31 of 1905, p. 751.

<sup>98</sup>Charles Tegart, Terrorism in India, p. 10.

<sup>99</sup>Amrita Bazar Patrika, 17 February 1905, Report on the Native-owned Newspapers (Part II), No. 7 of 1905, p. 69.

<sup>100</sup>Sandhya, 15 March 1905, RNP, No. 12 of 1905, p. 290.

While the victory of Japan was perceived as opening up a political possibility,<sup>101</sup> the preparation of the Swadeshi activists visualised this possibility also in terms of a spiritual fulfilment. Again it was the contested notion of Bengali masculinity that pervaded the confrontational politics of this period. The notion of an oppositional masculinity framed by sannyas lay at the heart of this assertion of masculinity. Vivekananda's emphasis on the spiritual strength of the asceticism became particularly important in this context.

Barindra Kumar Ghosh attested before a magistrate in May 1908 that he was convinced that 'a purely political propaganda would not do and people must be trained up spiritually to face dangers.'<sup>102</sup> This notion was further substantiated by his associate Upendranath Bandyopadhyay, who was also arrested in the Manicktola Bomb Case:

It was decided that we shall pick some boys from the Yugantar office, and build a new association in the Maniktala garden. We decided that we had to take boys who had no attachment to family or material life, or even if they were so attached could easily sacrifice such ties. However, such qualities cannot be acquired without gaining religious discipline, so it was decided to impart religious education at the garden.<sup>103</sup>

Self-discipline through spiritual education was perceived as the only means of ensuring a self-sacrificing spirit. An essential feature of the revolutionary's life had

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<sup>101</sup>Among the bioscope shows that became popular at this time were 'Full and Complete Russo-Japanese War' by the Royal Bioscope Company and the Anglo-American Bioscope Company as also the 'Bengal Partition Procession at the Town Hall' by the Elphinstone Bioscope Company. See The Bengali, 10, 16, and 28 September 1905, p. 2.

<sup>102</sup>Sedition Committee 1918 Report, p. 20.

<sup>103</sup>Upendranath Bandyopadhyay, Nirbasiter Atmakatha ('The Autobiography of an Exile'), Calcutta, 5th edition 1954, p. 8.



to be non-attachment to worldly ties. The essence of asceticism that became a guiding force for Swadeshi extremists lay in its power to mediate between the captive present and the independent past.<sup>104</sup>

Asceticism also carried with it the traditional associations of continence and the sublimation of sexuality with a higher realisation. Barindra Kumar Ghosh's autobiography, clarifies this correlation:

My own life provides the study of the good and evil effects of the anguished life of a Bengali boy deprived from the company of women. Many episodes prevented my experiencing the ultimate relationship with a woman in my youth, the opportunity only came when I was over forty-six or forty-seven years old. But I have felt that lack intensely - physically, emotionally and spiritually...But just as a huge fire chars the Banana plant with its heat and continues to burn with a inextinguishable light - so does a spirited and virile man.<sup>105</sup>

As we have noted in our discussion of Vivekananda, the transcendence of sexuality was perceived as an essential feature in spiritual education. In the case of Barindra Kumar Ghosh, it was comprehended as an achievement especially because of the total commitment to the cause of the nationalism that was demanded of the Swadeshi activist.

As we have seen in Chapter IV, the notion of a political sannyasi, an ascetic figure devoted to the nationalist cause, had evolved in Bengal much earlier. As a Calcutta Special Branch Circular noted in September 1896, 'sanyasi [sic!] preachers

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<sup>104</sup>This general feature of asceticism has been pointed out in in the context of Christianity: 'For the ascetic, self-discipline was a way of "mortifying," or making-dead the flesh. He could not seek his death as an end, but only as a means, a middle that could never end.' Geoffrey Galt Harpham, The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism, Chicago, 1987, p. 59.

<sup>105</sup>Barindra Kumar Ghosh, Amar Atmakatha, Calcutta, 1931, pp. 180-1.

were being more freely employed for the purpose of stirring up people in connection with Hindu revivalism and ... the aim of the preachers was political as well as religious and these sanyasis were young men with university education.'<sup>106</sup> By 1907, the Special Branch saw an increase in the number of politically active sannyasis. Further, the note observed the many advantages of political work done by sannyasis:

a Sadhu could move without being conspicuous, ... his expenses are insignificant ... he could live on the charity of people among whom he travelled ... he is received without suspicion by all classes of Hindus and ... his teaching acquires a touch of religious authority.<sup>107</sup>

The Special Branch saw the phenomenon as a pan-Indian one with political sannyasis active in North India particularly in the Punjab, Maharashtra and Bengal. The figure of the political sannyasi continued to be a source of threat to the Government even after the abrogation of the Partition in 1911 as Secret Police reports on the activities of revolutionaries reveal.<sup>108</sup> As many reports reveal, most political sannyasis came from educated backgrounds. Their education as ascetics comprised physical culture as well as spiritual training.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Calcutta Special Branch Circular, quoted in 'Political Activity of the Sadhus Up to 1909', Freedom Movement Papers, No.49., p. 4. West Bengal State Archives.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>108</sup>Among the revolutionaries listed in the Revolutionaries Green Book: Bengal Green List, 1930, Calcutta, 1986, several are listed as 'dangerous political sannyasis'. Among others it lists Makhoda Charan Khasnobis, the manager of Sandhya, who is described as 'generally dressed as a sannyasi - A most dangerous man.' No. 1142, p. 170; and Mukundalal Das arrested for his Jatra performances in 1908, was described thus: 'Used to dress like a sannyasi and sing objectionable songs at meetings and demonstrations.' No. 632, p. 95.

<sup>109</sup>For example, Jatin Banerji alias Niralambaswami 'came to Bengal sometime in 1902-3 and started a gymnasium near Sukea Street where he taught his pupils his political ideas.' Freedom Movement Papers, No. 61, 'Account of the Revolutionary Movement Part I and II (1899-1907)', p. 15.

The Sedition Committee noted that the pedagogy devised for initiates into revolutionary terrorism in Bengal included 'a remarkable series of text-books. The Bhagavad Gita, the writings of Vivekananda, the lives of Mazzinni and Garibaldi were a part of the course'.<sup>110</sup> Indeed the training programme designed for the revolutionary terrorists blended physical culture with lessons in spirituality. An example of such a programme is Aurobindo's explicit Bhawani Mandir ('Temple of Bhawani') written around 1905.

Bhawani Mandir itself was, however, 'more Barin's idea than his.'<sup>111</sup> This tract, was among the three books mentioned by the Sedition Committee in 1918,<sup>112</sup> and brought together the theme of devoted sannyasis serving the Motherland represented as Bhawani. The text of Bhawani Mandir reverberated with notions of inner strength and spiritual energy which were seen to be intrinsically linked to the cultivation of the physical. In its definition of nationhood, it is the same quality of spiritual strength was stressed once more:

For what is a nation? What is our mother-country? ... It is a mighty Shakti, composed of all the millions of Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation ... The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred million people; but she is inactive, imprisoned in the magic circle of Tamas, the self-indulgent inertia and ignorance of her sons.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Sedition Committee Report 1918, p. 23.

<sup>111</sup>Introduction to Bhawani Mandir in Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, Vol. I, Pondicherry, 1972, p. 59. Henceforth ABCL.

<sup>112</sup>The others being Bartaman Rananiti (1907) and Mukti Kon Pathe - a collection of articles from the Jugantar. Sedition Committee Report, 1918, pp. 24-5.

<sup>113</sup>Bhawani Mandir, ABCL, Vol I, 1972, p. 65.

The focus of the text then was on awakening the inert energy of the sons of Mother India or Mother Bhawani. Once again, the Hindu discourse was guided by the contemporary example of Japan. Japan as we have stated earlier epitomised Asiatic masculinity. In Bhawani Mandir, Japan's strength was seen to derive from its religious life:

All sorts of theories had been started to account for the uprising, but now the intellectual Japanese are telling us what were the fountains of that mighty awakening, the sources of that inexhaustible strength. They were drawn from religion. It was the Vedantic teachings of Oyomei and the recovery of Shintoism with its worship of the national Shakti of Japan in the image and person of the Mikado that enabled the little island empire to wield the stupendous weapons of Western knowledge and science as lightly and invincibly as Arjun wielded the Gandiv.<sup>114</sup>

Thus mythologising Japan's victory over Russia, the Hindu discourse saw in this example certain parallels with its own agenda: the inspiration of religion and the concept of the leader (the desh nayak), as we have seen in Jyotirindranath's elaboration of the allegory about the worship of the Motherland.

Among the the 'Three Things Needful', Bhawani Mandir stated the specific work of building a temple to Bhawani - 'the Mother of Strength, the Mother of India' which will have 'a new Order of Karma Yogins attached to the temple, men who have renounced all in order to work for the Mother. Some may, if they choose, be complete Sannyasis, most will be Brahmacharins who will return to Grihastha Ashram when their allotted work is finished, but all must accept renunciation.'<sup>115</sup> The parallels between Bankim's santans of Ananda Math and the agenda of Bhawani Mandir was

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

certainly not lost on participants and contemporary observers.<sup>116</sup>

The initiation scene in Bankim's Ananda Math had emphasised the aspects similar to those of the militant Swadeshi sannyasis. Satyananda, initiating Mahendra asked him to renounce all worldly ties of family, property and sensuality. Moreover, if he should fail to carry out his vow, he swore to 'give up this life by entering a lighted pyre or by taking poison.'<sup>117</sup> The parallels between this and the initiation rites of a Samiti like the Dacca Anushilan Samiti were obvious to the British authorities who saw the former inspiring the latter. The text of a vow taken by the Anushilan Samiti members confirmed the parallel:

In the name of God, father, preceptor, leader and Almighty, I make this vow that: ... I will not go away leaving this circle until its object is fulfilled ... I will not be bound by the tie of affection for father, mother, brother, sister, hearth and home and I will without putting forward any excuse, perform all the work of the circle under orders of the leader ... If I fail to keep this vow may the curse of Brahmins, of father and mother and of the great patriots of every country reduce me to ashes.<sup>118</sup>

Asceticism, therefore, far from becoming the means for individual salvation, had been remodelled with the added resonance of ensuring the salvation of the whole country from colonial rule. Moreover, combining the style of Bankim's santans and Vivekananda's universal Hinduism, Bhawani Mandir stated that the propagation of a world-conquering Hinduism exemplified in its Aryan ideals would be another task before the devoted sannyasis: 'others [sannyasis] will be sent to travel through various

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<sup>116</sup>See Hemchandra Kanungo, Banglay Biplab Prachesta, p. 244.

<sup>117</sup>Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Ananda Math in Bankim Rachanabali, Vol I, Calcutta, p. 699.

<sup>118</sup>Sedition Committee Report, 1918, p. 94.

countries on foot, inspiring by their lives, behaviour and conversation, sympathy and love for the Indian people in the European nations and preparing the way for their acceptance of Aryan ideals.'<sup>119</sup>

The incorporation of this particular icon of the sannyasi or ascetic figure within an avowedly political organisation, imply the ways in which the political movement of the Swadeshi integrated concepts about the oppositional self from a maturing Hindu discourse. The universal dimensions of this discourse were given a militant and aggressive edge as colonial rule became more violent and repressive.

Sannyas with its emphasis on self-discipline and the spiritual energy it generated was seen as a vehicle for propagating the politics of self-reliance. Addressing young students at the Dawn Society in Calcutta, in 1904, Sister Nivedita emphasised the way in which spiritual strength would prepare the nationalist boys:

If you are already spiritual enough to rise above all physical wants and necessities, and to devote yourself to the contemplation of the Divine Being, I have nothing to teach you, but on the contrary, to learn at your feet. But do you feel the necessity of eating and clothing and marrying? If you do you are far from the attainment of spirituality that you boast of ... I cannot understand the spirituality of a man busy in the search for food and shelter and clothing for himself and his family. For such a man, the only way to save himself from the bondage of the flesh would be to fight the world by working for higher entities like the nation or the country ... You, young men must always guard yourselves against that sham spirituality that dreads trouble and hankers after safety. The spiritual ideal that the Rishis set forth in their lives and in their work was never an ideal of ignoble ease or safety obtained by a cowardly retreat from the battle-field of life. A knowledge of the Tapas or hardships they underwent will dispel the slightest doubt on the matter.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup>Bhawani Mandir, p. 74.

<sup>120</sup>Lecture delivered on Sunday, August 14, 1904, at the Dawn Society, Calcutta. reproduced from the Brahmavadin, December 1904. Sister Nivedita 'Nationality', in Sister Nivedita's Lectures and Writings, Calcutta, 1975, pp. 152-3.

Nivedita thus included the sannyasi's ideal of renunciation for the sake of the Motherland as an essential part of nationalism. With the events of 1905, Nivedita imbued the same figure with a 'new' aggressive significance:

It is not his gerua cloth but his selflessness that makes a monk... In the soul of the mahapurusha, it is difficult sometimes to tell whether soldier or sannyasi is predominant. He combines the daring of the one with the freedom of the other.<sup>121</sup>

Later, attempts were made to integrate the figure of the sannyasi with Krishna, Bankim's ideal man and this integration was rationalised by the prevailing notion of karma. In Aurobindo's essay 'Sannyas O Tyag' ('Asceticism and Renunciation') in 1909,<sup>122</sup> the notion of sacrifice and renunciation were brought together by emphasising celibacy and non-attachment. The nationalist could thus envisage himself as devoting all his spiritual energy to the cause of the country and therefore dedicated to the greater community.

## Conclusion

The beginning of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal thus found a reconstructed Hindu cultural identity ready for deployment. As the Swadeshi movement intensified, several diverse trends manifested themselves. However, the pervasiveness of the evolving Hindu discourse cut across the diverse debates that were generated during the

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<sup>121</sup>Sister Nivedita, Aggressive Hinduism, Calcutta, 5th ed., 1974, p. 30.

<sup>122</sup>Sri Aurobindo, 'Sannyas O Tyag', ('Asceticism and Renunciation'), Dharma, No.3, September 1909, rpt., ABCL, Vol. IV, pp. 60-2.

Swadeshi period concerning the nature of political action. On the one hand, the Hindu cultural identity engendered by the discourse was intolerant and divided from within even as it spoke on behalf of the whole of India, on the other, the universalising tendency erased differences and 'Hinduised' all communities that were non-Hindu. This indeed was the paradoxical legacy of the Hindu discourse which continued to guide nationalist politics even when it took an avowedly secular form.

The evolution of a discourse of resistance contained both a critique of the dominant colonial discourse as also the fundamentals of an oppositional identity. The intellectual enterprise of framing an oppositional identity out of available cultural elements was the prerogative of a privileged group - a group that was educated and relatively free from the material constraints to which the subordinate population was subjected. On the other hand, it was a group that desired more control over its material condition than was presently possible because it was situated below the dominant colonial elite although above the toiling masses. The oppositional identity forwarded during the moment of political crisis of 1905 appropriated the available Hindu identity. While the economic aspects of the Swadeshi movement have been emphasised by historians, very little attention has been paid to the movement as heralding a publicised form of an oppositional, cultural Hindu identity. It was this cultural identity that acquired the spontaneous consent of its participants and significantly directed the common-sense notions of the educated middle class of Bengal about its social and cultural position within nationalism.

This accentuation of a Hindu identity lay at the heart of the failures of the Swadeshi movement - as it failed in its efforts to integrate the town and countryside



and marginalised the majority Muslim population. What lay at the core of the cultural identity exhibited in the Swadeshi movement, was an 'invented' Hindu identity which progressively marginalised Muslims as well as other communities. Although it targeted its aggression at colonial rule and opposed it politically, its inner divisions also redirected that aggression at non-Hindu communities. This expressed itself most clearly in the cultural events designed during the Swadeshi movement. While the deployment of 'traditional' festivals and events was a means of bridging the gap between the bhadralok and non-bhadralok social groups it failed to advance an identity that would unite the urban and the rural on the one hand and the Hindus and the Muslims on the other. Coupled with this British propaganda that there would be more jobs and economic opportunities for Muslims in the newly created East Bengal considerably influenced upper- and middle-class Muslims.<sup>123</sup> The Partition of Bengal therefore signalled the crystallisation of two opposing colonially constructed identities: the Hindus and the Muslims. In this attempt to homogenise identities the multifarious differences despite which the numerous sects of both these communities had coexisted were erased. The direct political confrontation with colonialism thus left its unfortunate mark on the Hindu discourse - the politicised discourse of an oppositional 'nationalist' identity would in future take on a communal colour.

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<sup>123</sup> 'When a proposal is put forward which would make Dacca the centre and possibly the capital of a new and self-sufficing administration which must give to the people of these districts ... the preponderating voice in the province so created, which would invest the Mahomedans in eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussulman Viceroys and kings'. Curzon's speech at Dacca, 18 Feb 1904, quoted in All About Partition, Published by P. Mukerji, Calcutta, 1905, p. 39.

## CONCLUSION

In 1905 in the wake of the Swadeshi movement, Sister Nivedita proclaimed that Hinduism had to draw on its fundamental aggressive character in order to call to the fore a strong and active heroic identity:

Aggression is to be the dominant characteristic of the India that is to-day in school and class-room - aggression and the thoughts and ideals of aggression. Instead of passivity, activity; for the standard of weakness, the standard of strength ... Merely to change the attitude of the mind ... is already to accomplish a revolution ... No other religion in the world is capable of this dynamic transformation as Hinduism.<sup>1</sup>

Elaborating her point Nivedita, Vivekananda's English disciple claimed that this transformation would enable 'India' to contribute to the world in cultural terms. Nivedita's essay serves as a summary of the principle themes of the Hindu discourse which we have attempted to map out in this thesis. Nivedita characteristically saw Hinduism as a homogenised religion which represented India's distinctive existence as a nation. Moreover, she equated aggressiveness with activism and strength - both qualities that had to be imbibed in this nationalist project. Yet this reconstruction of an aggressive oppositional Hindu identity was established within colonial parameters, appropriating from the colonial identification of races as 'martial' and 'non-martial' as also from the Oriental glorification of an 'Aryan' past. By invoking an aggressive Hindu identity at a moment of political crisis, Nivedita was giving a militant edge to the evolving Hindu cultural identity.

Thus what began as the construction of an oppositional cultural identity had by

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<sup>1</sup>Sister Nivedita, Aggressive Hinduism, 1905, 5th edition, Calcutta, 1974, pp. pp. 4-9.

the turn of the century taken on an aggressive religio-political character. The Hindu discourse which shaped this identity was articulated by an affronted colonised middle class. On the one hand the cultural identity this discourse forwarded was in opposition to official and missionary denigration of Hinduism, while on the other, its hegemonic drive sought not only to speak on behalf of subordinated social groups with whom it claimed a shared Hindutva, but also to marginalise the Muslim population of Bengal. This thesis, then, has demonstrated how a discourse can crystallise a cultural identity for its authors. In thus describing the process, this thesis has attempted to demonstrate how the hegemonic power of a discourse on cultural identity derives from the power of a dominant social group. The far-reaching implications of creating a culturally homogenous nationalist identity was revealed in the progression of this discourse from the cultural to the political.

This shaping of a ubiquitous Hindu identity in Bengal was a nineteenth-century construct. It is not as though Hindus in Bengal lacked a cultural identity prior to the nineteenth century; but earlier formulations perhaps existed on the basis of a localised identity rather than the pan-Indian Hindu one which this oppositional discourse set out to define for itself. The process of constructing a Hindu cultural identity was a pervasive and continuous process.

Given the pervasive and ubiquitous nature of this discourse, it becomes possible to ask questions about how ideas are produced and who articulates and propagates them. The British denigration of the Bengalis, particularly the Hindus, had resulted in the formulation of an oppositional identity by an articulate Hindu middle class that was English-educated. This class styled itself as a middle class, locating

itself on the one hand, below the zamindars and above the toilers, and on the other below the colonial elite. The process which enabled the emergence of a Hindu discourse in nineteenth century Bengal was stimulated by the modality by which this middle class hegemonically sought to better its position. The Gramscian concept of hegemony has enabled us to understand how this particular class was able to see itself as speaking on behalf of subordinate groups as leaders in a cultural revolt. The Indian National Congress founded in 1885 framed in its own way another leadership project. However, during the period considered here, the Indian National Congress remained confined to anglicised and successful professionals reckoning that the educated members were the 'natural leaders of the people'.<sup>2</sup> However, the earlier nationalist efforts of the Hindu Mela on the other hand voiced more clearly the attempt to hegemonise and speak on behalf of subordinate social groups in Bengal. Further, the Hindu Mela, although a small gathering compared with the Congress, generated a rich vernacular literature which helped to develop and in the long run sustain a cherished cultural identity. It was the Hindu Mela that aided in the congealing a specific Bengali Hindu identity which has provided us with an interesting starting point.

Moreover, in nineteenth-century Bengal, the colonial assessment of Bengalis/Hindus as weak, lacking in unity and physical strength remained a constant referent within a self-assessment on cultural terms. This discourse attempted to forge a heroic identity in reaction to the British efforts to create a hegemonic categorisation in the form of the strong and brave 'martial' and the weak and cowardly 'non-martial'

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<sup>2</sup>Gokhale's Presidential Address, Congress 1905, quoted in Sumit Sarkar, Modern India, 1983 rpt., Madras, 1985, p. 90.

ances. One of the ways in which the indigenous discourse formulated its counter-hegemonic project was by creating an oppositional history. Thus through an indigenous 'invention of tradition',<sup>3</sup> heroic legends about the 'martial' Rajputs and Marathas were appropriated into the nineteenth-century rewriting of history. The project of history-writing evolved through a series of interactions between indigenous and colonial notions. The centrality of the historical consciousness to the evolving Hindu discourse aided in the framing of a cultural identity whereby the present potential of the Bengalis was explained in terms of the heroic past of the Marathas and the Rajputs. Interacting with imperial classification the idea of heroism incorporated the concept of militancy into the notion of dedication to dharma. It was this interaction that enabled the reconstruction of the Hindu identity with all its contradictions.

On the one hand, the gallant Rajputs and the hardy Marathas were seen as emblems of Hindu heroism with a pedagogic function for the 'weak' Bengalis, while on the other, this glorious history was generally perceived to be a 'common' legacy of the Indian Aryans, identified by the Orientalist scholars as the founders of ancient Indian civilisation. With colonialism as the immediate context of their articulations, such historical self-descriptions together with the efforts to homogenise a cultural rather than religious Hinduism answered the deeply felt need for an identity and self-hood which could be elaborated and generalised to include all Hindus.

As many of the social customs that were designated 'barbaric' by official and

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<sup>3</sup>Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds., The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge, 1983.

missionary discourses were specifically related to women, legal reform as well as missionary activities were directed at saving these unfortunate victims of custom. Not surprisingly then, formulations about the nature of Hindu culture in colonial Bengal were intricately entwined with questions about gender. Therefore the heroic content of this emerging Hindu identity was often framed in terms of a female icon - the icon of the motherland 'more glorious than heaven itself'. The process by which this discourse was gendered enable us to understand the transformation in self-perception among the articulators of this discourse.

The construction of two specific gender-icons - the wife and the mother with continual reference to Hindu legend and social practices like sati demonstrate how the middle class collated the ideals of heroism and the principles of domesticity in its efforts to consolidate its Hindu identity. Far from attempting to modernise the bhadramahila, this discourse sought to reconcile the 'modern' and the 'traditional' with the colonially induced notion of heroism. This was brought about by infusing the image of the sati with a heroic content and simultaneously stressing her contained domestic aspects. The construction of the ideal woman was thus heroic in terms of the 'sacrificing' spirit of the sati and at the same time devoted to the principles of domesticity like the mythical Sabitri. To be an ideal wife, however, was perceived by this discourse to be a transition to a higher state - that of motherhood. By granting such a prominence to the place for women as mothers, wives and daughters within the family this discourse substituted the gender issue for the class issue. The peasant and his environment were remote and less important than the discourse's defence of 'our' women against colonial interventions.

Hindu motherhood and its ideals became an overwhelming concern of this discourse on an oppositional Hindu identity. While other scholars have attempted to demonstrate the importance of gender in the framing of a nationalist identity, this thesis has stressed that the commitment to the ideals of motherhood coupled with an appropriation of Queen Victoria as mother-figure were vital features for this hegemonising discourse articulated mainly by male members of the middle class. For the articulators of this discourse, Victoria apart from denoting a strong and capable mother-figure, also represented as monarch their putative self-image as leaders.

The construction of Hindu womanhood in terms of icons of resistance was matched by the reformulation of a different masculinity. Vivekananda's reshaping of the conventional Hindu tradition of sannyas provided this discourse with an alternative male identity. By transforming the traditional figure of the sannyasi in this way, Vivekananda's 'man-making' project embraced the twin themes of sacrifice and spiritual energy - both qualities required by the devoted nationalist son who desired to emancipate his Motherland. Moreover, his stress on universalist dimensions of Hinduism represents an extraordinary transformation in approach. The rationalisation of Hinduism before an international audience thus left the peasant world of his guru Ramakrishna far behind. Vivekananda's stress on spiritual conquest and his reformulation of the sannyasi icon in terms of active masculinity appealed tremendously to Swadeshi activists.

tremendously sannyasi became for the Swadeshi activists the icon of spiritual heroism conferring on them the strength to transcend the petty ties of family and community. By devoting all their spiritual energy to the cause of the country, the Swadeshi

activists could envision themselves as being dedicated to the greater community. The story of the liberation of the Bharat Mata thus became a story of renunciation and sacrifice.

The political crisis of 1905 therefore had a ready-made discourse about an oppositional Hindu identity which included political dimensions. The Swadeshi movement brought about by the Partition of Bengal transformed this discourse into a pan-Hindu discourse about an aggressive Hinduism. Both in terms of the imagery deployed as well as in intellectual and cultural activities the Hindu identity expressed itself on a more expanded scale than previously. The political potential of cultural events were now presented in dynamic public forms. Although the hegemonising aspects of this discourse attempted to relate to a much wider public than the Hindu Mela of 1867, the failures of the Swadeshi movement lay in its deployment of a Hindu cultural identity which alienated the Muslim population. In this the Hindu identity, despite its nationalist gloss, reflected the colonially posited opposition between Hindus and Muslims.

The year 1905 provided an appropriate closing point for our discussion of this discourse on cultural identity as it demonstrates the overlaps between cultural and political identity at a critical historical juncture. Although the Hindu discourse continued to guide and motivate the dominant metaphors in the hegemonic discourse of Indian nationhood, it was compelled to take cognizance of the different nationalist discourse which expressed itself through organisations like the Muslim League founded in 1906. Moreover the moment of political crisis restructured priorities quite differently in order to deal with the more immediate. Henceforth it was mainly in



contradistinction to the Muslim cultural identity that this discourse defined itself in Bengal and more generally in India. As the oppositional discourse on cultural identity entered a larger polity the closely fused Bengali/Hindu identity dissolved into a larger 'national' identity based on symbols and institutions that originated outside Bengal but within what was perceived to be a greater Hindu community. This reconstructed nineteenth-century Hindu discourse about a national identity resurfaced within the broad communal agendas of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Samiti in 1915 and 1925 respectively.

With reference to the contemporary constructions of a militant Hindu identity which has exploded in violent communalism, Romila Thapar has aptly pointed out, that the Hindu identity is a fabricated one:

Deriving largely from the Orientalist construction of Hinduism as well as what it regarded as the heritage of Hindu culture, Hindu identity was defined by those who were part of this national consciousness and drew on their own idealised image of themselves ... This involved a change from the earlier segmented identities to one which encompassed caste and region and identified itself by religion which had to be refashioned so as to provide the ideology which would bind the group.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis has endeavoured to assess critically the formation of a pervasive discourse about cultural identity within a colonially defined space. By demonstrating the diverse factors that underlay the construction of identity, this thesis has attempted to describe and understand the way in which a discourse about identity operated within colonialism. The construction of this Hindu identity integrated Western and

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<sup>4</sup>Romila Thapar, 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity', Modern Asian Studies, Vol 23:2, May 1989, p. 230. For critique of the communal approach to Indian history see Romila Thapar et al, Communalism and the Writing of Indian History, 1969, rpt. New Delhi, 1981.

indigenous images: myths of origins, history, organisations as well as social relationships. This interactiveness apart, this self-descriptive discourse expressed itself in a range of cultural practices - from literature to modes of organisation - all attempts by an articulate middle class to frame an oppositional identity. Although this furthers Foucault's notion of the ubiquitous nature of discourse it also establishes discourse as the product of the hegemonic activities of an articulate middle class. The attempt at self-assertion and empowerment through a pervasive Hindu discourse was enunciated by a Western-educated Bengali middle-class.

This thesis has been an attempt to trace this particular paradigm of the oppositional nationalist identity which negotiated its essentials from the religious field. This refashioned cultural identity has guided several nationalist itineraries and unfortunately continues to direct through its many manifestations the injurious tradition of communalism. Even as the evolving Hindu discourse of nineteenth-century Bengal constructed a homogenous Hindu identity out of indigenous and colonial sources, the very project was divided from within. With the changing priorities of British rule, the oppositional identity had to constantly reinterpret the range of its Hindu ideology. The unfortunate consequences of such colonially constructed identities are evident in the communal politics of present-day India. However, the specific links between past and present agendas constitutes another story.

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